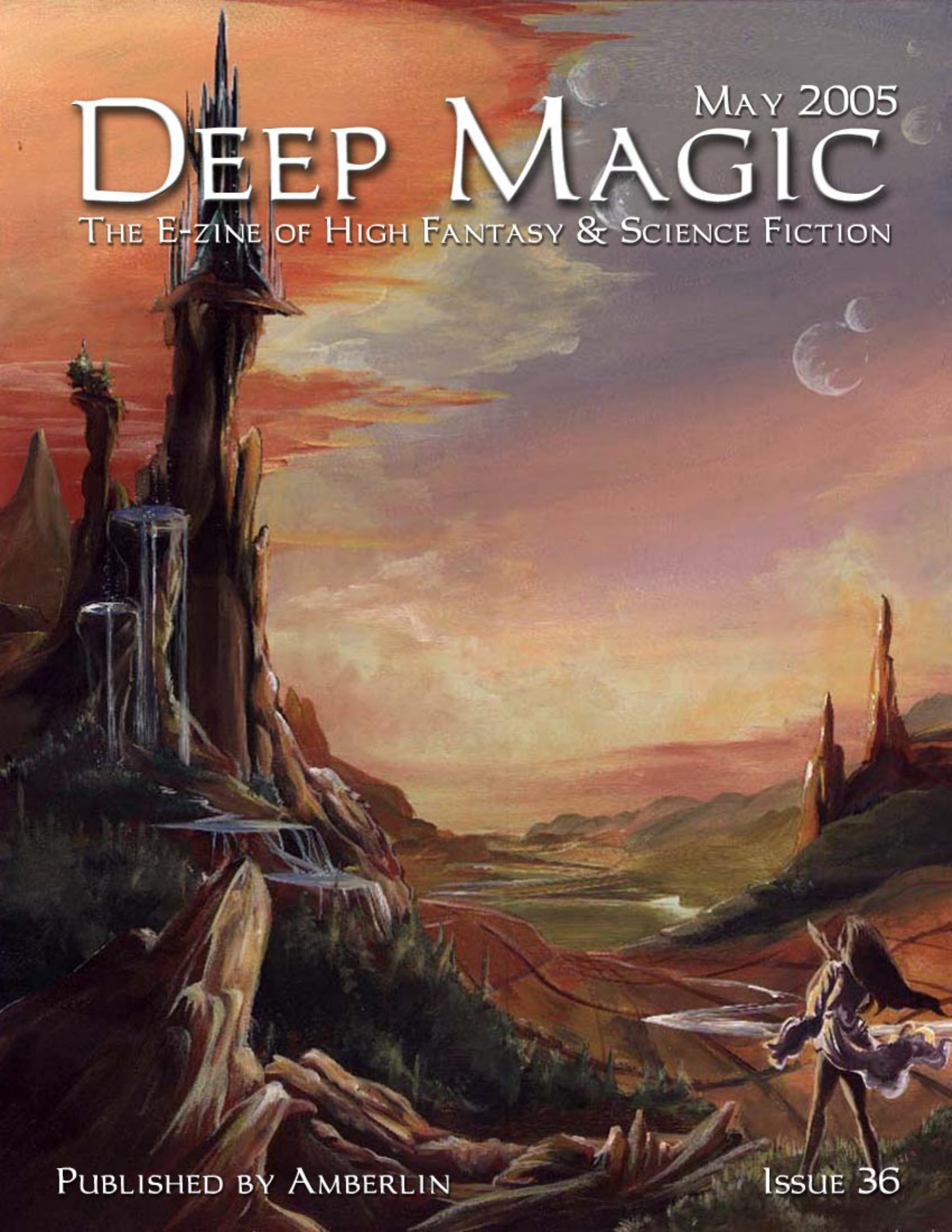

May 2005
Deep Magic
The E-zine of High Fantasy & Science Fiction
Published by Amberlin
Issue 36

Founders

Chief Editor – Jeremy Whitted
Managing Editor – Jeff Wheeler
Contributing Editor – Brendon Taylor

Senior Staff

Tech Geek/Kenatos Lead – Steven Richards
Book Reviews Manager – Matthew Scott Winslow
Copyediting Manager – JW Wrenn

Staff

Copyeditor – Joel Brown
Book Reviewer – Rochelle Buck
Art Coordinator - Nikki Goethals
PocketDM Layout/Kenatos Lead – Mike Loos
Copyeditor – Mark Reeder
Copyeditor – Keri Stevenson
Book Reviewer – Sean T. M. Stiennon

Submissions Review – All Staff

Graphic Design – Jeremy Whitted
Art Director – Jeff Wheeler
Associate Art Director – Reuben Fox

Marketing – Jeff Wheeler
Legal – Brendon Taylor

Many thanks to our volunteer proofreaders:
A. M. Stickel
Isaac Nydegger
L. D. Reece
Johne Cook

Website: http://www.deep-magic.net
Feedback: http://www.deep-magic.net/contact
Forums: http://www.deep-magic.net/forums

Cover by Stephanie Pui-Mu Law
"Dawn's Song"

Deep Magic strives to produce and publish morally responsible art and literature. Although great effort has been made to refer our readers to like-minded websites, Deep Magic is not capable of controlling the content in other sites linked to or referenced herein. Thus, Deep Magic encourages its readers to use their own discretion when visiting other sites identified on our site or in Deep Magic: The E-Zine of High Fantasy and Science Fiction.

All Content copyright © 2005
Amberlin, Inc., an Idaho Nonprofit Corporation

Table of Contents

Note From the Editors 3
Writing Challenge 4
Fantasy Short: *Sun and Sky* 7
SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT 8
Featured Artist: Stephanie Pui-Mu Law 11
Fantasy Short: *The Fall* 13
Article: And then the light bulb went on... 14
SciFi Short: *Soul-Tied Twist* 16
Amberlin Books Publications 17
Fantasy Novel: *Shadowloom* 18
Deep Magic Looks at Books 19

Subscribe to Deep Magic!

A subscription to Deep Magic is absolutely free. Each month, we will notify you when a new issue is released. You will also be notified periodically when Deep Magic has special news or offers. Go to the website and subscribe today.

If you are familiar with the internet at all, you know how common dead and broken links are. If you ever try to access a link from this e-zine and it no longer works, don't give up. Go to http://www.deep-magic.net where you will find archives of previous issues. As we catch dead and broken links, we will make a note on the corrections page for that issue. If that is the case, you will find the corrected URL there. If we have not already caught the defective link, please let us know, and we will do all we can to track down an updated URL for the information you seek. However, please keep in mind that sometimes content is taken down and is gone forever.

May 2005

This May issue marks the end of our third year publishing Deep Magic. We almost didn't make it to the end of our second year, but thanks to all of you, we're still going strong.

We are also taking a giant step forward this month—we are going to become a paying e-zine starting with the June issue. What does this mean? It means that authors and cover artists will now be paid for their work to appear in Deep Magic. It's not a lot right now, but it's a big step forward for us. With this, we expect to attract even more authors to Deep Magic, which will in turn provide you with even more quality stories to read each month.

So how are we paying for this? Check out our Special Announcement in this issue for all the details. One thing we'll mention here, though, is that you will still be able to come download new issues of Deep Magic for free each month. Be sure to read the announcement, though, because this next step won't be possible without your help.

As for this issue, we bring you the amazing artwork of Stephanie Pui-Mu Law, as well as an interview with her. Author Naomi Kritzer has also provided a writing craft article titled, "And then the light bulb went on..." Our fantasy novel, *Shadowloom* by Mark Reeder, continues with its second installment.

For short stories this month: Amy M. Smith tells of an underground civilization in *Sun and Sky*; a prophecy regarding a kingdom and its fourteen-year-old king is fullfilled in *The Fall* by David R. Eland; and two scientists discover the unexpected in *Soul-Tied Twist* by Chris Przybyszewski.

Thank you once again for your support of Deep Magic. Be sure to drop by the forums and say hi.

Enjoy!
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication.

To submit a challenge, go to our new online submissions system. You will need to create an author profile and account. **We have a new due date for Writing Challenge submissions!** They will be printed one month later, and you have longer to submit them. Please note the deadline date below.

May 2005 Writing Challenge
Entries due June 10, 2005

The writing challenge for this month is a little macabre, but it is intentional. Death is a subject that has been around for a long time. But what happens to the soul or memories of a person who has passed on? This theme has played out in literature and movies (think movies like Always, Titanic, Somewhere in Time–even the Star Wars saga has portayed the ghosts of the Force since Empire Strikes Back hit theaters). The challenge is simple. Write a story about a character who has just died and comes to realize that the afterlife isn't exactly what they had imaged it to be. And since this is a fantasy and science fiction e-zine and not a religious institution, keep it interesting and creative and set in a universe or planet in the genre. We are excited to see the creative afterlives that exist in your imagination. We will be even more excited if you keep it under 1000 words.

Selections from the March 2005 Writing Challenge

Rumor Has It

The above stories were selected from the March challenge, which was to write a scene using a backstory provided by Deep Magic.

Don't forget the April challenge due May 10:

This month's challenge is inspired in part by this month's cover by Howard Lyon. Bards, Minstrels, Storytellers...whatever their name, whatever their role, musicians have long had a role in fantasy. Perhaps they are the comic relief, or maybe the narrator. Sometimes they just provide a little atmosphere. The challenge this month is to create a scene involving one or more of these minstrels. They can be a main character, your narrator, or maybe just the evening's entertainment at the local tavern. Be creative, have fun, and keep it to 1000 words or less.

Rumor Has It

By Michael "Dmitri" Blascoe

Another summer evening in Baldwick. Or Bored-wick, as I chose to call it. Nothing exciting in this town had happened since the gold rush dried up and died a couple of decades ago. Of course, I hadn't been there myself, since I was a product of that very same excitement.

Rumor had it, my father was a gold miner, who had come in with the rest of the treasure-seekers trying to get rich, and my mother had fallen under his spell. Once there was no more gold, however, he disappeared in the night like all the rest, leaving my mother and her newborn child watching the night sky. She and I would still do that, sit up and watch the stars, pretend that they're keeping an eye on us, protecting us. She never talked about him, but I always had the feeling she was still waiting for him.

I had decided at a young age that I didn't like being called an orphan, and I liked the term 'bastard' even less. At some point, I don't recall exactly when, I started saying that my father had died in the woods south of town, being a hunter and all that. When someone asked me his name, I decided that Rumor had a nice sound to it, since my birth father was truly only a rumor to me. When some of the older townsfolk ask me why they don't remember him, I simply tell them that he came with the gold rush and died a couple of years later. No one remembers all of the people who were here for such a short time.

My mother was no help to me or the townsfolk. She'd always been a bit dim; not unintelligent, but simply living in her own little world. When people asked her about her deceased husband, she always pleaded that she couldn't remember him, just that he was a good man and that she missed him. People seldom asked her for more details, because they were fairly sure she wouldn't remember anything. So, not wanting to seem ignorant or forgetful themselves, they just started generating memories of the man.

"Hey, Coran, where are ye headed so late?" one of the neighborhood elders asked me, walking in the other direction towards the heart of our small town. "A bit late for hunting, isn't it?"

I glanced up at the sun, still a handspan above the western horizon. "Enough time to catch a bird for dinner," I replied confidently.

"You just be careful," he advised me. "Don't want you to end up like your old man, Rumor! You know he died hunting in those woods when you were just a babe." Of course, I thought to myself, I invented the story. It always struck me as amazing how the townsfolk had taken my fictional father and treated him like a town legend.

"I'll be careful," I promised the old man, bowing my head in mock sadness for my mock parent. "I know better than to be out at night when the phantom songs begin." He patted me on the back, approval for my youthful wisdom, and bowed his head in departure. I did likewise, then continued on my way.

None of the townsfolk knew what the strange sounds were that came at night, but most of us saw them as harmless murmurs coming from the old, abandoned caves. Maybe a wind blowing up from a retired shaft. A few of the less courageous citizens had petitioned Mayor Chessne to request help from the Duke's men in Garenburg, a day's ride north, but so far, the Duke hadn't decided our little mystery was that important.

I heard someone one time suggest that it was the ghost of my father, Rumor, the only man who had supposedly ever died in the woods to the south of town, and I would very carefully reply that it was an interesting theory. Yesterday, I'd heard someone start calling the phantom song 'Rumor's Cry.' Ridiculous, I know, but it gave me just the opening I was looking for. I had been eager to investigate those sounds for weeks, and if people started thinking it was my dead father's ghost, it would give me the justification I needed to go out and look.

After all, if Rumor had something to say, it was only fitting that his son be the one to hear it.

Sun and Sky
By Amy M. Smith

The hard, stone floor had a numbing effect and Corah uncrossed and re-crossed her legs to relieve her discomfort. She stole a subtle glance at the time dial at the back of the room and stifled a sigh. *Still three more rotations*. She slouched to relieve the pressure on her unsupported back and looked across the room, trying to catch Jana's sympathetic eye. The other girl did not notice as she bent forward, writing intently in her notation book. Corah sat up, surprised to find that Jana would be able to glean enough information from Sir Calaphus's monotonous History lecture to require note taking. Stealing a peek at Jana's notation book, Corah laughed slightly to herself. Jana was drawing, not taking notes. Corah would reprimand her friend after class, but she knew it would do no good. Jana was just like that.

Mentally dragging herself back into the lesson, Corah regained her focus in time to hear Sir Calaphus give the evening's assignment. She scribbled it into her own notation book, and then hurried to join Jana on her way to Calculations.

"Maybe we should start our essay," she said, ignoring Jana's glare and Pescha's frown. "We're supposed to compare living arrangements before the Exile to how they are now. Let's start with 'now,' and then we can look up how things used to be."

* * *

Corah lay sprawled across her sleeping mat, doing her homework by the light of a twin candelabrum. She resisted the urge to light another candle and instead leaned forward in the dim light to read her History assignment. *Write a 150-word essay comparing common housing arrangements in pre-exilic society to modern living.*

Sighing in exaggerated exasperation, Corah picked herself up off the floor. Wisps of smoke floated upward as she doused the small candle flames, replacing them with the glow of her hand lantern.

After a quick goodbye to her parents, Corah stepped into the hallway. The wall lights lit the hall well enough, so she turned down the flame on her lantern to conserve the oil.

Hurried footsteps pattered against the stone floor. Corah turned to see Jana trying to catch up.

"Going to the Bookroom?" Jana asked, almost hopefully.

Corah nodded. "History," she said, holding up her notation book.

"Me, too."

The girls entered the crowded Bookroom and scanned the tables, looking for a vacancy. The walls of shelves were dimly visible in the pockets of light created by the lanterns sturdily affixed to the tables. The room was packed.

"There's Pescha," Corah said, pointing to their classmate.

Jana groaned. "I'd rather work with a dung beetle."

Corah rolled her eyes. Jana was so dramatic. "Come on. She's got a table and a few

continued on page 24

Deep Magic 2.0
Special Announcement

For the last three years, we have been engaged in a great experiment. The founders came together and created an e-zine dedicated to morally responsible genre fiction. We favored high fantasy but also included science fiction. Thirty-six issues later, we have grown from 90 subscribers to over 1400. It is time we took the next step that makes even greater things possible. We cannot do it without you.

Effective June 2005, Deep Magic will begin paying our authors and cover artists. Going from a non-paying mag to a paying one is a big milestone for us, and we hope it will allow us to continue growing our readership and growing the volume of writers who submit quality stories to us. Our goals are modest and the pay will be as well. We will start off paying **$25 per story and cover art per issue**. We intend to increase this significantly as reader support grows. Ultimately, we desire to pay professional rates to attract even more professional talent.

This is where you—our readers—come in. Last year, we started a pledge drive to keep up with our growing operational burden. We were pleased and humbled by the generous donations, which have allowed us to operate another year and transform Deep Magic into a non-profit company. We are still waiting for word from the government that our 501c3 application has been approved so that donations become a tax write-off. We are confident this will happen and that all donations (past and future) will be deductible.

Deep Magic has always been a free monthly publication. We intend to keep it that way so that those who do not have the means can still enjoy quality writing and art. There will be some changes, though, coming in June. We want to create incentives for readers to become "members" of Deep Magic. Just like public television or National Public Radio (NPR), we rely on your support to make this e-zine possible.

We request that each of you **become a member of Deep Magic by donating $25 or more** to the e-zine every year.

Why? If you value good fiction, if you value stunning artwork, if you value our "safe places" standards, you should vote with your wallet. Three years worth of content is a long time to get to know us. If you have appreciated the quality material you continually get from Deep Magic each month, please help us grow with a generous donation. By becoming a member, you will get certain benefits.

Member benefits include:

- Access to all back issues. (On June 1, 2005, we will limit the availability of back issues to the previous three months. Feel free to download all past issues before the deadline). New visitors can sample our quality before deciding if they want to become members and gain access to the back issues, or they can purchase specific back issues for a nominal fee of $2 per issue. Members, of course, will have access to all back issues.
- Access to a critting group forum on our message board. We have created a private section on the message board for our forum fans to exchange writing and crit each

other's work. Only members will have access to this area. Sometimes even the editors and staff may drop in and offer comments and encouragement.
• Access to a personal blog. The popularity of weblogs (blogs) has been truly amazing. We plan on offering our members two blogs if they desire. One to manage an identity living in the shared world of Kenatos. The other for personal use. As always, the content must maintain our "safe places for minds to wander" standards or we'll have to revoke the privilege. Keep it clean, folks.
• Discounts on e-book versions of Deep Magic publications.
• For any gamers out there, you can have access to a roleplaying forum for running or playing in a pbp campaign.
• We will continue to add benefits for members as we move forward. We also welcome suggestions from all of you for possible membership perks.
• For questions about these benefits and how they will be implemented, visit this topic on our forums.

We would like every reader of Deep Magic to enjoy these benefits by becoming a member. After all, we're not asking you to change your religion or anything.

So how do you donate and become a member? Here are the options:

• If you simply wish to donate any amount of money and aren't interested in a membership, you can:
• Send funds via PayPal to pledge@deep-magic.net, or
• Mail a check or money order to: Amberlin, Inc., 791 Fir Street, Pocatello, ID 83201.

In either case, please keep a record of your payment in case you decide to activate you membership at a later date.

• To become a member, donate at least $25 (more is welcome!). The easiest way is to create an account on our newly-upgraded forums (if you haven't already), go to My Controls, and select the Purchase Paid Subscriptions option. Select the option for becoming a member and pay with your PayPal account. You will be given membership status when payment is authorized.
• If you don't wish to use PayPal, send your funds to the address above. Be sure to include you name and Forum ID so we can give you membership status.
You will be notified before the year is out to remind you to renew your membership.
• Are you interested in donating more than $25? Those who donate $50 or $100 will receive a special 'badge of honor' so to speak. Kind of like a Charter Membership. There aren't any special privileges, but we will set up a page on our website where we will honor those generous donors.

Why are we doing this?

We have discussed these changes very seriously. By restricting back issues or allowing certain privileges to some readers and not others, we run the risk of alienating some of you.

Our vision for where we want to take Deep Magic compels us. Imagine where this e-zine could be three years from now with your financial support? We already bring you articles and stories from great writers. But they can be better. Right now, the artwork we publish has been given to us second-hand. They are pieces that have appeared elsewhere first. Imagine some of the best fantasy artists creating cover art exclusively for you.

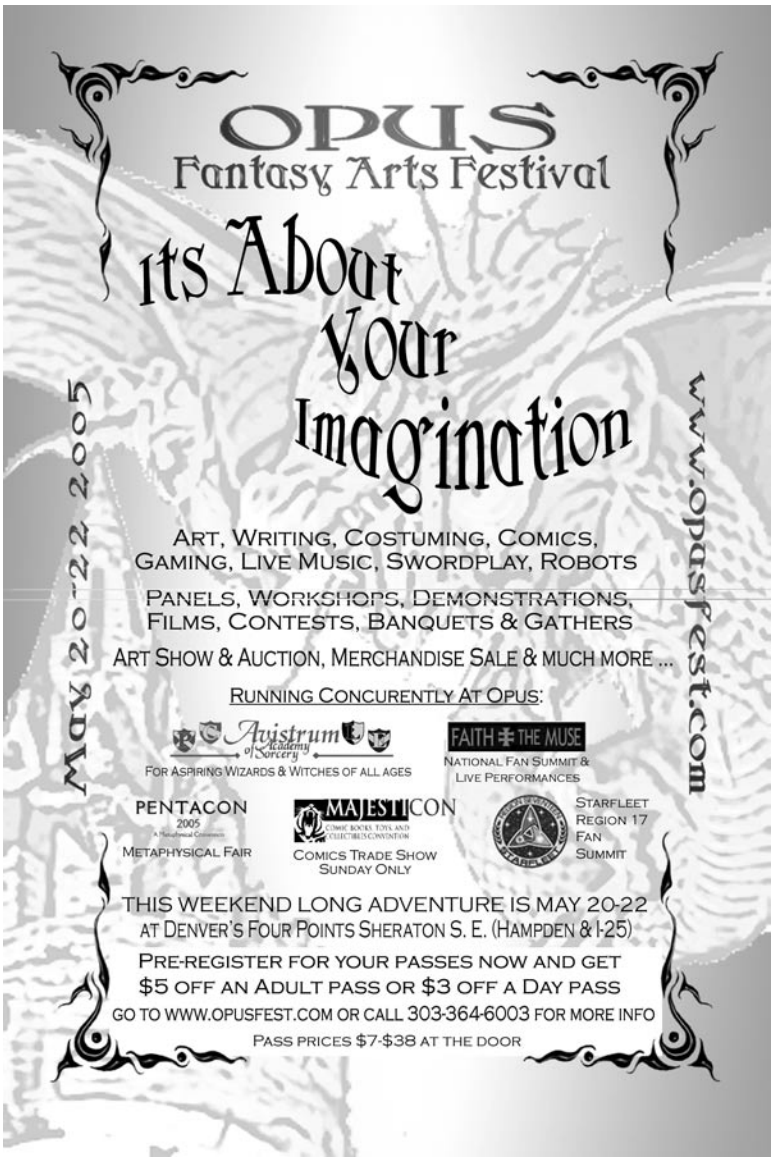
There are plenty of stories with gritty realism and adult themes out there. So many artists create paintings you wouldn't want your children seeing. Here at Deep Magic, we have created a universe of safe places for minds to wander. Many of you have enjoyed the genre since you were teenagers. Many of you are teenagers now. Imagine what can happen if we make this e-zine a statement that quality does not need to be sleazy to appeal to people. If these are reasons that have attracted you to Deep Magic, help make it possible to bring you and thousands more like you even better things to come.

Without your support, this e-zine cannot succeed. We are taking a risk that our track record over the last three years has proven our sincerity. We care about the genre. We care about our readers. Our entire staff gives hundreds of hours to make this available to you (in PDF and Pocket formats, no less). Many of you would love it if we became a hard-copy publication that you could bring with you and hold in your hands. We would love it, too. If every reader became a member, that dream might even be possible.

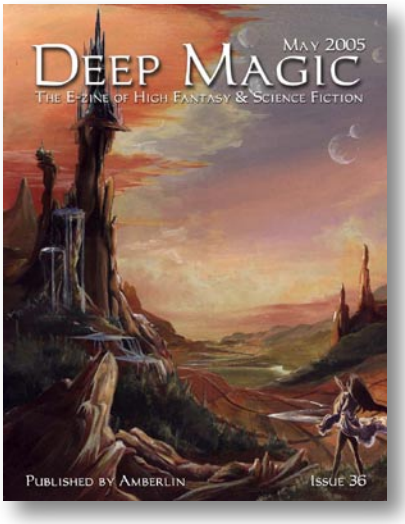
What are you waiting for? To show us you care about Deep Magic, send your membership dues or contribution and help take Deep Magic to the next level.

Together, we can make even more magic happen.

All the best,
The Editors


OPUS
Fantasy Arts Festival
It's About Your Imagination
MAY 20-22 2005
www.opusfest.com
ART, WRITING, COSTUMING, COMICS,
GAMING, LIVE MUSIC, SWORDPLAY, ROBOTS
PANELS, WORKSHOPS, DEMONSTRATIONS,
FILMS, CONTESTS, BANQUETS & GATHERS
ART SHOW & AUCTION, MERCHANDISE SALE & MUCH MORE ...
RUNNING CONCURENTLY AT OPUS:
Avistrum Academy of Sorcery
FOR ASPIRING WIZARDS & WITCHES OF ALL AGES
FAITH THE MUSE
NATIONAL FAN SUMMIT & LIVE PERFORMANCES
PENTACON 2005
METAPHYSICAL FAIR
MAJESTICON
COMICS TRADE SHOW SUNDAY ONLY
STARFLEET REGION 17 FAN SUMMIT
THIS WEEKEND LONG ADVENTURE IS MAY 20-22
AT DENVER'S FOUR POINTS SHERATON S. E. (HAMPDEN & I-25)
PRE-REGISTER FOR YOUR PASSES NOW AND GET
$5 OFF AN ADULT PASS OR $3 OFF A DAY PASS
GO TO WWW.OPUSFEST.COM OR CALL 303-364-6003 FOR MORE INFO
PASS PRICES $7-$38 AT THE DOOR

Featured Artist
Stephanie Pui-Mu Law



Age: 28
Residence: Oakland, CA
Hobbies: Reading, flamenco dancing, piano, rollerblading.
Started Painting: As early as I can remember.
Artist Most Inspired By: No single artist, but here's a few of them: Surrealists, Impressionists, Pre-Raphaelites, Alphonse Mucha, Michael Parkes, Alan Lee, Daniel Merriam.
Media You Work In: Mostly watercolor, but also pencils, digital (Photoshop), pen and ink.
Schools Attended: B.A. in Art from University of CA at Berkeley.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: Displayed—mostly internet, my own site, and various other gallery sites, also many conventions. Published—Wizards of the Coast (Magic: the Gathering CCG, Forgotten Realms), Cricket and Cicada Magazines, HarperCollins, LUNA books, Elemental Designer Games (ChessMage CCG), Elmore Productions, Skotos (Castle Marrach RPG), Alderac Entertainment Group (Warlord, Seventh Sea, and Legend of Five Rings CCGs), Talislanta, Black Knight Games, Z-Man Games (Shadowfist CCG), Precedence Entertainment (Wheel of Time CCG, Rifts CCG), Sabertooth Games (Warhammer CCG), Green Ronin Games, Misguided Games, Bastion Press, "The Art of Faery" by David Riche and Brian Froud, "Watercolor Fairies" by David Riche and Anna Franklin.
Website URL: http://www.shadowscapes.com

Q: How did you come to be an artist?
A: I've always wanted to be an artist, from as early as I can remember. Art as a career choice was pushed aside when I headed to college. I was convinced by everyone around me that I would be just another "starving artist," so I studied computer science. I got a job as an engineer, but it became pretty evident to me that I *needed* to do art in order to be happy. I wouldn't be able to keep it just as a hobby, because it wasn't enough. So I started submitting my art portfolio to art directors and attending various conventions. One day I actually got a response from 'Wizards of the Coast' to my inquiries. Three years later, I quit programming and dove into art full time. I have never been happier.

continued on next page

Q:How would you describe your work?
A: I don't aim for realism—more of a fantastical reflection of this world. Colors that don't really exist under this sun. Constant flow of movement. In terms of subject matter, I'm heavily influenced by mythology and folklore, legends, and stories.

Q:Where do you find your inspiration?
A: Old and new stories, a fanciful phrase, the way the light comes through the trees, a leaf stain on the sidewalk....

Q:What inspired this piece (our cover art)? (Tell us its story...)
A: This piece...I did when I was about sixteen years old. It's actually one of my early paintings, quite possibly the oldest piece I still display publicly. It's not a complicated story, just a greeting to the rising sun...that feeling of peace and tranquility, as if you're the only person in the world in that early morning stillness.

The Fall
By David R. Eland

Holding the hem of her dress to keep from tripping, Nanexse ran down the deserted cobble-stone street. The long strands of her now white hair still dripped from washing out the gall-oak dye that had disguised its color since her childhood. She could not turn back. The growing compulsion to deliver the prophecy to the young king had finally overridden the fear that had kept her silent for three days. Nanexse had to reach the city gates before the army marched.

She ran around a corner, but saw the horse and rider too late to avoid them. Iron-shod hooves clattered on the paving stones, and the cavalry horse sidestepped, hitting her with a glancing blow. She tumbled to the street, scraping her hands on the stones. Before she could stand, the soldier dismounted and was beside her. He gripped her thin shoulders and lifted her up, staring in awe at her white, seer's hair.

"Ah-are you hurt?" the young rider stuttered, still looking at her hair.

Nanexse stepped back, pulling her arms free. "I'll be fine. I have to go before the king leaves." The young man was handsome and looked no older than her own seventeen years.

"You are a seer. If you have a message for the king, then let me take you."

She nodded.

"I am Kahil, and this is Sabaa." He lifted her into the saddle and climbed up behind her.

King Maghreb, only fourteen winters old, sat upon a white charger in the midst of his officers. At the sight of her pearl-white, seer's hair, his eyes went wide and then turned dark and narrow. Nanexse slipped off Kahil's horse and knelt beside the king's white charger.

As she spoke the prophecy, anger filled the young King. He drew the ancient sword of the first king, Naharam. "You? You are the seer? A little girl?! No. It is not true. There has never been a woman seer."

"I beg you, my lord, to hear the words I am commanded to give you. This is the word of the Maker for Maghreb. Be he righteous or evil, wise or foolish, the Law demands the king's life as a ransom for the people. If he fails in this and fails to keep peace in the land, then I will bring on him, and on all the house of Naharam, a day like none before. In that day I will punish Maghreb for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. I will release the mighty floodwaters of the East. The sea also, I will raise against him. Together they will sweep across Edom, swirling over it and reaching up to the neck."

As she spoke the prophecy, anger filled the young king. He drew the ancient sword of the first king, Naharam.

"You? You are the seer?" he sneered. "A little girl?! No. It is not true. There has never been a woman seer. The last seer died with my father. There has not been another. There will not be another."

With a flashing thrust, the tip of his blade pierced Nanexse's left eye. He flicked the blade across her other eye but missed, cutting her eyebrow. She screamed. Her white hair fell across her bloody face as she pressed her palms into her wounds.

continued on page 34

And then the light bulb went on...

By Naomi Kritzer

Like the vast majority of writers, I wrote for a long time before I was able to sell anything. I first tried to write a fantasy novel when I was in fourth grade. (It was a story about a magical white horse with telepathic powers, and most of the plot was ripped off from the TV movie of *Puff, the Magic Dragon*. Fortunately, I have no idea what happened to the wide-ruled Mead notebooks I wrote in at the time.) When I was thirteen, I scrawled several *hundred* pages of a semi-historical novel set during WWII. (I say semi-historical because it had a historical setting, but was both deeply implausible and internally inconsistent.) I first attempted to sell a fantasy story in high school; I sold my first short story when I was 26.

What did I have to learn before I was able to sell?

Well, I had to learn to enjoy the process of writing. I had to learn some discipline and a coherent writing style, which came mostly from practice. I educated myself on all sorts of useful rules of thumb, like C.J. Cherryh's "said-bookisms" rule (rely on the words "said" and "asked"—eschew alternatives unless they are clearly required). However, there were also light bulb moments, times when I realized: Ah ha! *This* is what I've been trying to do, and *now* I know how to do it.

My first breakthrough moment was when I learned how to revise. When I was sixteen, I completed a fantasy story that I wanted to try to sell somewhere. I was fortunate enough to have a generous adult friend, a fan of SF/F, who offered to read it and comment. I had written it nearly stream-of-consciousness, adding whatever popped into my head. One key moment mentioned that the protagonist felt rather smug about something—this was explicitly stated. My friend underlined that and wrote in the margin, "Do you really want your protagonist to feel *smug*?" It was a small change, but that was a moment, for me as a writer, when the light bulb clicked on. No, I didn't want my protagonist to feel smug in that spot, because I wanted people to like my protagonist, and it was a very short story—the audience didn't have much to go on. Now, there's nothing *wrong* with having a smug protagonist if that serves your story, but it didn't serve this story at all. Previously, "revising" had mostly meant that I read over what I'd written to look for grammatical errors and misspelled words. The next time I wrote a story, I sat down with my own red pen and made endless notes in the margins—talking to myself, basically, about the story. (I didn't sell the story my friend edited, but I did get some very cordial rejection letters for it.)

My next breakthrough was theme. I had started writing fairly seriously at this point: I had joined a critique group and was writing stories, handing them out, revising them, and submitting them. One day I read a collection of short stories by Orson Scott Card that included commentary on each story. One of the stories was about a man who had molested his daughter, and was now being pursued by a monster. In his comments on the story, Card noted that the monster is the embodiment of the man's guilt, and that the story is all about guilt—and thus the word GUILT never itself appears in the story. I read this, and the light bulb went on: I'd been trying to write stories that were *about* some central theme that was not necessarily voiced in the story. Once I recognized that, and started doing it deliberately, my stories became markedly better. I graduated to personalized, "please send us your next story" rejection letters.

My next light bulb moment was realizing that in my stories, character *change* was central. I was a big fan of the *Sword and Sorceress* anthologies edited by Marion Zimmer Bradley, and she summed up the essence of a *story* as, "Joe has his fanny in a bear trap, and here is how he gets it out." This is a formula that works very well for some authors. It didn't work for me. The key was realizing that *my* formula was, "Joe has his fanny in a bear trap, and here is how he is changed by his efforts to get it out—whether he actually gets it out or not." I had been writing stories about the person with a problem to solve—not the person with a difficult choice to make. When I started identifying the *real* protagonist, and rewriting accordingly, *that* was when I started being able to sell my work.

My final breakthrough moment was related to process, and ironically it came from watching someone else write. He glared at the screen, and at me, and said, "I know *exactly* what's supposed to happen and how it's going to end. *So why is this part so hard?*" I had spent years, early in my writing, convinced that this part—the *writing* part—would suddenly, magically, *not* be hard if only I could learn the right outlining technique or find the perfect pen. What I realized, watching my friend, was that there are no magic talismans and there are no shortcuts: the only way it gets easier is if you sit down and you *do it*. The more I wrote, the more I was *able* to write.

Your mileage, of course, may vary.

Author Bio: Naomi Kritzer's short stories have appeared in Realms of Fantasy, Strange Horizons, Tales of the Unanticipated, and Sword and Sorceress XXI. She lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with her husband and two young daughters; her first novel, Fires of the Faithful*, sold on her older daughter's first birthday. Her latest book,* FREEDOM'S APPRENTICE*, was published in April 2005.*

Soul-Tied Twist

By Chris Przybyszewski

Jaena slid one hand and then the other into the silvery interface gel, a mechanism made of stem-cell cytoplasm. The gel's metallic sheen belied the medium's organic origin. It oozed over her skin, and Jaena tried to ignore that the stuff felt alive, sentient. The gel took its time to adapt to her skin type, to her body temperature, to the beat of her heart.

Jaena pulled her glistening silver hands from the interface containment. She glanced at her lab partner, a man named Lawrence. He wore a faux sapphire pendant around his neck. He had bought it as a gift from a dollar store.

"Why are we doing Reilly's work again?" Jaena asked.

"You threw a tantrum," Lawrence reminded her.

"I was venting. He's taking us too slow."

"You killed his goldfish."

"That was an accident," she replied. She smiled at the memory.

"You threw a book at his head," Lawrence recounted. He sounded like he was reading a clinical report. An autopsy. "You threw the book, and you missed by a foot. The book hit the aquarium. It cracked open. The goldfish spilled out. It died." Lawrence had not looked from the series of computers that acted as command control for the psychosurgery project.

"I tried to be nice about it."

"Jaena," Lawrence finally looked up. She had hoped to make him smile with this conversation, but from his face, she figured that she had failed. "You held the fish as it gasped for breath, and you told Reilly it was his fault for keeping the tank behind his desk."

"It was just a fish."

"Then you dropped the 'just a fish' into the garbage."

"A fish."

"His daughter gave it to him, Jaena."

Lawrence's hand drifted to that pendant, as it did when he was reminded of such things. He wore the thing after all this time. He stared into a space separate from the present, to a time of reading bedtime stories and of baths scented with lavender, a time of diapers and unconditional love. Jaena could not watch him long.

Jaena changed subjects. "We should work on human subjects," she dreamed out loud. "We should push Reilly's technology into clinical trials."

"You've said that to him. He isn't interested."

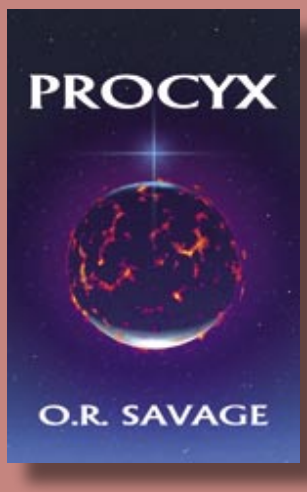
"Reilly's scared."

"He doesn't understand fear, Jaena," Lawrence replied. "He can't weigh it. He can't quantify it. Well, maybe he could, now, but he doesn't care about the human of the species."

> **"I do too. But still, when Reilly showed us this interface he created, when he showed us that we could connect the inner world of our conscious to that of another being's ..." Lawrence's voice trailed off. His hand dropped from his pendant.**

continued on page 49

Amberlin Books, publisher of Deep Magic, is proud to showcase our print publications. Each book can be ordered online at Amazon.com and BN.com. They can also be ordered from your local bookstore.



Procyx appeared at the edge of the Galaxy, just as ancient Mhyrnian texts had predicted. To scientists it was a fascinating anomaly, for it seemed to be a star that shone in only one color–a single frequency of pure, blue light. But then nearby worlds began to crumble, spinning into fiery deaths while their suns exploded or smothered out in a dreadful finality called Hypermotility. Humanity's only hope lay in the Vanguards, mythical vessels of irresistible power. Yet it seemed these wondrous ships of light were only myths. Meanwhile, centuries passed. More and more star systems died and nothing could be done to stop the spread of Procyx's cancerous ruin . . . unless the Mhyrnians had an answer for this too . . .

Cover Price: $14.95 Trade Paperback (three books in one!)

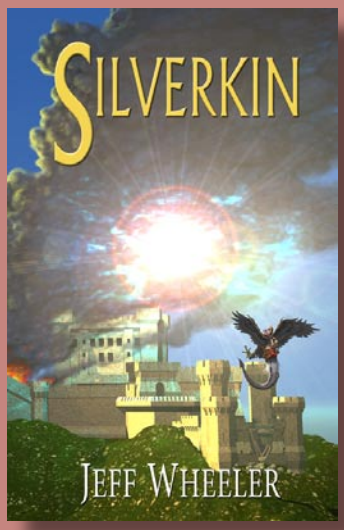
ISBN: 1586490044

Landmoor & Silverkin

Buried in the catacombs beneath the fortress of Landmoor lies the Silverkin, an ancient talisman that can overcome any Forbidden Magic. Thealos Quickfellow has the right to claim the Silverkin but knows little about the deadly consequences befalling those who wield it. Before he can lay claim to it, however, he must first slip beyond the web of Sorian, who have beset Landmoor and battle amongst themselves for supremacy. Meanwhile, Exeres Tallin, a druid priest from Isherwood, has followed his dreams and mission to Landmoor. While there, he learns the truth of the evil Sorian as he is compelled to serve them. On his journey, Thealos will learn personally of the sacrifices required to become a Sleepwalker and how to use the Silverkin to save his people. But will using it destroy him?

Cover Prices: $9.95 Trade Paperback (Landmoor)
$9.95 Trade Paperback (Silverkin)

ISBN: 158649001X



ISBN: 1586490060

ISBN: 1586490028

ISBN: 1586490052

Deeper Magic Vol 1 & 2

These anthologies contain the best stories published by Deep Magic during the first two years of publication.

Cover Prices:

$12.95 Vol 2
$14.95 Vol 1
Trade Paperback

AMBERLIN BOOKS

Continued from Issue 35

Shadowloom

By Mark Reeder

Chapter Four

A slick gray fog, closing out all sight and sound, enveloped me as I passed beneath the arch. A faint tingling prickled my skin. My horse kept moving; at least I assumed we went forward since I could no longer feel him beneath me nor the motion of his muscles. The grayness dissipated. Sound returned first, and I could hear the clop, clop clop, clop of Morgan's mount along the trail. Moments later I could make out a diaphanous figure through the vaporous eddies; and then she solidified as I passed out of the fog into clear air.

The clearing had widened considerably. On either side of us, strange trees, bent and twisted like gnarled old men, and boulders of chert, hewed into contorted shapes, speckled a slab of violet rock that extended to the horizon. Overhead the sun lay, a glowing blister against a lavender sky.

I did not recall anyplace in Enion to be like this. Not even the steepest crags and most remote cirques of Tirach Mir produced landscape this peculiar. On the other hand, the gaps in my memory meant that I could not say what the mountain's different faces showed. I remembered only that Peer and I would occasionally come across strange beasts on our hunts, so why not a misty archway that opened into a desolate valley?

Morgan did not speak to me after we exited the fog. Shoulders rigid in concentration, she kept her eyes fixed on the trail before us. Occasionally, I heard her curse under her breath when our course took what must have been an unanticipated turn.

Bits and pieces of memory came back then. I recalled fleeing for my life. Something heavy struck me and I fell, stunned or knocked unconscious. The next thing, someone was pulling me from burning wreckage.

We moved steadily, our mounts' shod hooves clicking metal sparks with every step. The trail rose steeply for at least the first hour as we climbed high above the rocky plain. The air grew thinner and a glacial cold enveloped us. Crystalline plumes of vapor wreathed Phobos' and Deimos' muzzles. As we neared the summit, snow scudded in wispy sheets across the trail, and the air shimmered with crystals of ice that swirled around us in sparkling whirlwinds.

At the crest, a fierce gale blew a snowstorm directly into our faces. Tiny particles of ice sliced into my cheeks, and I was forced to wrap the cowl of my cloak over my eyes and mouth until only a tiny slit allowed me to follow Morgan's movements. Her brown cloak reeled in and out of sight in the howling storm. Phobos shied and tried to bolt. I held him fiercely and we plunged after Morgan.

After a few minutes, we descended sharply and left the blizzard behind. The freezing cold ended quickly after that, but the air remained cool and dry. The hard ground turned to sand.

continued on page 56

Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

Be sure to check out the Book Reviews website, which contains all current and past book reviews in an easily searchable format. It also allows you to leave your own review or feedback for a book. All you have to do is register on our message boards and you can tell others what you think of the books. We hope you enjoy it, and we'll see you there!

Deep Magic Book Reviews website

Editor's Choice: Fantasy

The Knight
By Gene Wolfe

Many of fantasy's better tropes have become quite tired. One of the more salient arguments against high fantasy, sword and sorcery, and quest fantasy is that it's all been done before…many times. People like China Mieville and Michael Moorcock have even defined themselves by just how much they can make themselves out to be 'cutting edge' by subverting fantasy tropes.

There is, however, a reason that many, many readers keep coming back to fantasy; a reason why many, many readers buy novels whose stories are familiar. One of those main reasons is the power of myth, and our modern world has all but destroyed myth. Everything is ordered and tidy; when things get beyond our control—as evidenced by the recent tsunami disaster—we struggle to find an answer.

So it is with great pleasure that I picked up a consciously mythic tale by one of science fiction and fantasy's most demanding yet most satisfying authors, Gene Wolfe. In recent years, Gene Wolfe has been creating his unique form of myth by expanding his 'Sun' universe in the Books of the Short Sun and the Long Sun. Now, however, he has turned to big fantasy with his two-volume novel, *The Wizard Knight*.

The first of those volumes, *The Knight* (the second volume being, naturally, *The Wizard*) introduces us to a teenager from our world who is mysteriously transported to a world where reality exists in seven layers, each layer viewing the layer above it as gods and in turn being viewed as gods by the layer below it. Most of the story takes place in the middle world of Mythgarthr. As the name suggests, there is a lot about this world that overlaps with Norse mythology. Here we have dragons and ogres and giants and elves.

Upon arriving in the seven-layered world, our hero is given the name Able of the High Heart by an old crone who then dispatches him to Mythgarthr. Able soon finds himself transformed into a full-grown man of heroic proportions, but still with the mind and soul of a youth. He sets out on a meandering quest to find a sword that will make him the knight that he pretends to be.

As with many Gene Wolfe novels, however, the protagonist is passive in relation to the plot: things happen to him, but rarely does he move to make things happen. This results in a plot that is at times hard to discern: too often it feels like Able is just wandering and letting things happen to him.

But that's OK (although a bit frustrating at times), because one quickly comes to understand that *The Knight* is as much about exploring the mythic dimensions of fantasy as anything else. As he encounters one fantasy trope after another, Able grows into the manhood that has been thrust upon him. He grows by encountering the fantastic and, as such, Wolfe shows how much fantasy is of value today. As is common with Gene Wolfe novels, what we see on the surface is only the tip of the iceberg and Wolfe's writing invites us to dive down deep into the bitter and difficult waters in order to find out more. That journey, however, is not always an easy one and not everyone enjoys making such a journey. *The Knight* is a wonderful book to read, but I highly suggest you venture into it only if you are prepared to work at finding its meaning. As with many other Gene Wolfe novels, if you commit to the effort, you will find yourself enriched afterwards, but you must first commit. And since this book is about myth, what you come away with is a more profound sense of the world around you and what it means to be human.

continued on next page

Possible objectionable material: there are a couple low-key sexual encounters.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy
The Drawing of the Dark
By Tim Powers

The year is 1519 and Brian Duffy, an Irish mercenary with a long career behind him, is languishing in Venice teaching the art of fencing. Then, a mysterious old man named Aurelianus hires Duffy for a job as bouncer at the Zimmerman Inn, located in Vienna, Austria. The inn is the home of some of the best beer in the world, the Herzwesten, brewed continuously for centuries.

Duffy sets off to take up his position, but on his journey he finds himself confronted with a series of assassination attempts, a mysterious tavern full of goat-footed men, a troop of mythical beasts that escort him through the Alps, and an army of dwarves which saves him from a band of hired killers. He is also plagued by strange dreams and visions, including a recurring one of a moonlit lake with an upraised arm holding an ancient sword. Once he arrives in Vienna, he finds himself caught in a war between the forces of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and the armies of Europe—and also into a magical conflict between East and West, in which Duffy, Aurelianus, the Sultan's vizier Ibrahim, and the Herzwesten beer all play critical parts—in fact, the brewery might even be the hinge upon which the fate of the West turns.

The Drawing of the Dark is one of Tim Powers' earlier works, and although it doesn't quite match up to his more recent novels such as *Declare*, it is nonetheless original and entertaining. Brian Duffy, in particular, is excellently done as an aging and world-weary mercenary thrown into extraordinary circumstances, which he faces with early skepticism, later acceptance, courage, and always a dash of humor. When he is attacked by horrible monsters of the East, rather than cower away in fear, he fights them practically and worries about the details later. Also, Aurelianus is one of the better ancient sorcerers I've yet encountered in fantasy.

Still, there are some problems. Most of the book takes place in Vienna, particularly the inn where the Herzwesten beer is brewed, and the lack of variation in setting made some sections of the book a little difficult to get through. Some scenes are also a little repetitive, with overly similar dialogue, events, and drinking (there's a lot of drinking in this book, as the focus on beer implies).

Also, several characters don't really end up having much purpose, although they appear in several scenes. I don't mind some characters who just fill in the gaps (i.e., the commander of the army defending Vienna), but there were too many characters who I expected to influence the plot more who really didn't do much in the end.

Aside from that, *The Drawing of the Dark* is a fine book. I particularly liked the well-done historical setting and the emphasis on cities, siege warfare, and contact with the general populace rather than lonely quests through barren landscapes. The magic and encounters with mythical beings are also very well described; Powers' prose is always good, and sometimes it's excellent.

Possible objectionable content: There are a couple mild sexual references, and most non-action scenes involve alcohol, often to the point of drunkenness

(Reviewed by Sean T.M. Stiennon.)

Book Review: Fantasy
Truesight
By David Stahler Jr.

Harmony Station, much like her sister colonies and their mother foundation on earth, is a unique place. Everyone who lives there is happy. There is no crime, no division; all are equal, and everyone knows his or her place in the community. And everyone in Harmony is blind.

continued on next page

Outsiders, known as 'Seers', can't begin to comprehend how the 'Blinders' can truly be happy. Yet no one has ever wanted to leave the colony, or complained about their way of life. Or so it seems to Jackson and Holman, the two computer specialists sent to provide maintenance repair for the ghostbox; the giant computer which takes care of all Harmony's technological needs; that is, until a frightened girl approaches them and whispers a frantic plea: "Help me get out!"

Jacob is going to be thirteen in two weeks. He is excited, but also anxious; the end of the year will mark the end of his childhood, and he will receive his career specialization. But there is trouble in Harmony. One of his best friends, the daughter of Harmony's most prominent dignitary, has tried to run away and the town is buzzing with rumors: the Seers came, and she went to them; she was ill, had forgotten who she was; everyone knew something.

Jacob is confused. Delaney had everything a child of Harmony could possibly want—lots of friends, an important father, and a specialization in music, the most important of all specializations. He is shocked when he overhears an argument between Delaney and her father, in which Delaney makes her disgraceful confession. "Father, I want to see." Her father strikes her, horrified his own daughter would even think such an impure thought.

Jacob's life is only becoming more confusing. He is experiencing headaches of such magnitude, he is afraid he may be dying. The pain subsides, but Jacob is aware of a sensation he has never experienced before. There is something, something he does not yet know to call light, which has forced it's way into his consciousness. It is vague, hazy, but there. He opens his eyes, and it is there. He closes them and it disappears.

Although he is horrified when he first realizes what is happening to him, he soon comes to value his sight. He discovers pleasure in watching things, watching insects, animals, people, nature herself. But he also discovers that corrupt officials reserve the best for themselves, and the blindness of the population keeps them unaware of it.

But most importantly, Jacob discovers that Delaney, his dear friend, is not dead, as he was told....

This is an exceptional story, told exceptionally well. The characters are strong and believable, and the changes Jacob struggles with are portrayed realistically. The planet Nova Campi has enough of the otherworldly about it to make it believable, but not so much that it becomes strange and unfamiliar. In the first book of his new Truesight series, David Stahler Jr. is proving to be a welcome addition to the world of young adult sci-fi writers, and I'm looking forward to the release of the next book.

Possible objectionable content: there is a hint of sensuality, but it is rather vague; nothing that should present a problem.

(Reviewed by Deborah Prindler)

Book Review: Fantasy
The Amber Spyglass
By Philip Pullman

The multi-world universe of Lyra Silvertongue spins to a close with a peek through *The Amber Spyglass*. In book one of the trilogy, we learned the story of Lyra and the true nature of her parents. In book two, she met Will Parry and they gained possession of the Subtle Knife. In book three, a war for eternity is waged that will determine the fate of the million worlds sewn together and the mysterious Dust that binds them all.

Lyra has been abducted by Mrs. Coulter and taken to a remote location in the Himalayas where she is drugged into a dream-frenzied sleep. Mrs. Coulter's loyalties begin to totter—should she give Lyra over to the Church or send the girl to her estranged lover, Lord Asriel, who is preparing for war against the Kingdom of Heaven and the archangel Metatron who rules it? The Subtle Knife can turn the tide of victory either way, but Will refuses to join either side until he can reunite with Lyra and cut their way to safer worlds.

After Lyra and Will are reunited, they begin a dangerous quest to the world of the dead. It is a domain of bleakness, plagued by harpies that torment suffering

continued on next page

souls from all worlds. To make that journey, both children must pay a cost more wretched than anything they can imagine. In the shadowy afterlife, Lyra rejoins her ghost-friend Roger, the boy she grew up with at Oxford. Will and Lyra must lead the ghosts to a place where the Subtle Knife can open into freedom. As they pursue this goal, they learn the dual nature of the Knife and the horrific cataclysm that awaits the universe if the tears between worlds aren't healed.

Meanwhile, Lyra's friend, the physicist Mary Malone, has traveled to a unique world where evolution has created a different species. There she constructs the book's namesake, the Amber Spyglass, that allows her to finally see Dust and use her scientific training to determine the cause of its disruption. Chasing her is an assassin from the Church in Lyra's world, who is desperate to destroy the little girl before a prophesy regarding her is fulfilled. Both Asriel's multi-world armies as well as all the hosts of Heaven search the universes for the twelve year-old girl and her companion.

The Amber Spyglass failed to deliver the momentum carefully crafted in the first two installments of the trilogy. The series as a whole is interesting and wildly creative, but the secrets it revealed did not live up to the promise of them. From a technical standpoint, there were many plot elements that did not add up. For example, Mrs. Coulter kidnapped Lyra and held her hostage in a shrine in a far away mountain. Yet she seemed to get there instantaneously while Will, following her trail, had to travel by various means to cross the same distance.

Another criticism is that the world of Mary Malone, the place where she builds the Spyglass, is dull compared with the other worlds Pullman has invented. The threat of the holy assassin completely loses all energy by a *deus ex machina* ploy.

Some readers might find the attack on organized religion (especially the Christian religion) offensive, but I did not. It's a book, and a work of fiction. I read it as such. If anything, its cryptic portrayal of "truth" only reaffirmed my own convictions. The series does a wonderful job building convincing and engaging characters. In the first two books, it did a superb job integrating a rich and complex plot. But by the third book, the plot is more contrived, and the tension robbed by setting up two strawmen ("science is fair and objective" and "religion is close-minded and ruthless") and bashing them together at the end instead of revealing the truths in each.

This series should prompt excellent discussions between parents and children regarding faith and science. I was no more persuaded to dismiss a belief that the universe is organized by a benevolent Supreme Being than I was to accept the notion that I am a person and co-mingling with my own personal daemon, my own personal death, and telepathic subatomic particles. Nor would I label this as author's intent either (to persuade me that his view of the universe is "real"). If anything, his intent is to spark controversy, to make his readers re-think their basic assumptions. In that, he was successful. And he was also successful is making me care about Will and Lyra and invested in their poignant dilemma.

Possible Objectionable Material: the conclusion builds to a Garden of Eden-like finale between Will and Lyra where sexuality is more hinted at than blatant. What happens between them and the implications to the universe are left to the reader's imagination.

(Reviewed by Jeff Wheeler)

Book Review: Fantasy
A Scholar of Magics
By Caroline Stevermer

In this sequel to *A College of Magics* (see review in our March 2005 issue), Caroline Stevermer returns us to the world in which magic is real and magicians have colleges where magic is studied and learnt. Returning from the previous book is Jane Brailsford. However, one need not have read *A College of Magics* in order to follow and enjoy *A Scholar of Magics*.

The plot is fairly similar to that of *A College of Magics*: the story focuses around a college of magic where a person in the college is unwittingly a center of magical power but refuses to take up that mantle in order to repair a rift in the magical fabric of the world. In both books, there are villains whose hats feature prominently

in their ability to work magic, as well as labyrinths playing predominantly in the plot.

But even though there are many similarities—almost too many—*A Scholar of Magics* stands on its own merits. This time the story centers around the British college of Glasscastle whose dons are involved in helping the British government develop a secret magical weapon, known by the evocative name of Project Agincourt. To help them develop the weapon, they've employed American sharpshooter Sam Lambert. Onto the scene comes Jane Brailsford, sent by Faris (from the first book), who is trying to encourage one of Glasscastle's dons to take upon himself the mantle of magical Warden. Someone, though, is determined to use Project Agincourt to his own ends, and he would love either to use the power of the warden to his own ends, or simply to be rid of the warden altogether.

As Jane attempts to convince the warden of his duties, she finds herself drawn in to the intrigue of the mysterious Project Agincourt.

Because Jane is the sole woman wandering through the exclusively male college of Glasscastle, it would be easy to make this book out to be about male/female, matriarchal/patriarchal boundaries. Indeed, there is a bit of that here, especially if you compare this book to its predecessor, but Stevermer rises above such silliness by showing how both models (matriarchy, patriarchy) have value and problems, and that the answer lies somewhere in between. All this, however, is subtext. If you want an enjoyable read, then *A Scholar of Magics* is a good choice. In the characters of Lambert and Jane, we are given strong-willed individuals who nonetheless acknowledge in their own ways where they have to grow, allowing such growth through the course of the novel. Indeed, the denouement avoids becoming cliched for this very reason, giving a strong sense of satisfaction to the novel: by book's end, the reader is given not only a satisfyingly completed plot, but also a satisfyingly created relationship between the two main characters. Compared to *A College of Magics*, *A Scholar of Magics* is a much more satisfying novel on many levels.

Possible objectionable material: none. Very safe.

(Reviewed by Matthew Scott Winslow)

continued from page 7

books." She gave Jana an encouraging nudge and led the way across the room.

Pescha looked less than pleased at the prospect of their company, but she did not complain as Corah and Jana turned off their lanterns and pulled their chairs close. Corah felt a sting of envy as she noticed Pescha's lantern still blazing its warm, full light. Leaning closer to the table's lantern, Corah told herself unconvincingly that she preferred the dim light.

"Is this all there is?" Jana asked, pointing to the three worn books on the table.

Corah gave Jana a warning kick under the table. She and Jana both knew that Pescha was never less than thorough. Jana was only questioning to undermine the other girl.

"Of course it is," Pescha snapped with an insulted frown.

Jana looked equally upset as she rubbed her leg and leaned forward. "My father says there used to be *thousands* of books in the Bookroom."

Corah smiled sympathetically. Jana's father was as much a romantic as his daughter. But then again, Corah's own father had been known to tell a tale or two on occasion.

"Every year we have less books," Corah said, "because the Magistrate has more of them pulled for recycling."

Jana made a face at the mention of the Magistrate. "But paper *still* keeps getting more expensive."

Pescha shrugged. "It's not so bad."

"Not for you," Jana said. "Your father works for the Magistrate. You can afford it."

"My father says that government jobs are the only way to make a living."

"Well, *my* father says—"

Corah kicked Jana again, harder this time. She was well aware of Jana's father's opinions on the government, rationing and the Magistrate, and she was more concerned with finishing their assignment than starting a fight.

"Maybe we should start our essay," she said, ignoring Jana's glare and Pescha's frown. "We're supposed to compare living arrangements before the Exile to how they are now. Let's start with 'now,' and then we can look up how things used to be."

She sectioned off a blank area on a used page in her notation book. There was no sense in wasting a new page until she was ready to write her essay.

"What do typical living quarters have?" she prompted, pen poised.

Pescha began, "Well, my family has three rooms, so we're not really 'typical.'"

Jana glared at her and Corah hid her envy. She had seen Pescha's living quarters. She could barely imagine what it would be like to have so much space.

"I suppose," Jana said, "that most families have some sleeping mats, a few lanterns—"

"We have fourteen," Pescha interrupted.

Corah ignored her, thinking of her family's five small lanterns, and urged Jana to continue. "And maybe a few tables and chairs. Everything else is share-space."

As soon as she finished the list, Corah capped her pen to keep the ink from drying out. "Alright. Let's each look up the contrasting elements from before the Exile. Jana, you take living quarters, Pescha—sleeping mats, and I'll look up the tables and chairs."

The other girls agreed, each reaching for a book. They flipped quietly through the old volumes, the only sound the turning of pages and an occasional scratching of a pen against their notation books.

"I'm ready," Pescha announced, looking at the other two as if challenging them to be finished.

"Me, too," Jana returned her stare.

"Alright, what did you find?" Corah asked, looking nervously between the other girls.

"Before the Exile, everyone had their own 'house.' They weren't even connected to all the other houses, and they had lots of rooms—usually five or more." Jana gave Pescha a triumphant look, apparently elated that Pescha's three-room living quarters were quaint compared to the glory of the ancient world.

Pescha looked unaffected. "And they used 'beds' instead of sleeping mats. They were like long boxes raised off the floor and covered with blankets."

"Well," Corah said, "they had tables and chairs before the Exile, but look at them!" She turned her book around. "Aren't they funny looking? Some of them are even made out of *wood*!"

Jana and Pescha laughed at the ludicrous design of the pre-exilic furniture. Corah thought that perhaps they would continue to get along until Jana asked, "What about the lanterns?" The other girls looked at her. "They didn't use lanterns before the Exile. They had the *sun*."

Pescha laughed again, but this time it was a mocking laugh, devoid of humor. "Don't be stupid. I'm not about to fill my essay with a bunch of fairy tales."

Jana looked hurt. "But the Ancients…" she began.

"The Ancients are a bunch of crazy dead people. The last Prophesy was written nearly two hundred years ago. The whole "Surface" idea is just a myth. There's no "above world" over us—there's nothing but rock."

Desperation filled Jana's eyes. "The sun is *not* a myth," she protested. "It's right here in these books."

"Where?" Pescha challenged.

Jana flushed. Corah was not sure if it was with anger or embarrassment. "Well, I haven't found it yet… but I will." She turned her eyes back to her book and began reading furiously. "Look in yours," she commanded. "You'll see."

Corah sighed and turned her own book back toward herself. Like Jana, she had loved the Surface stories when she was a child. She had dreamed of the wondrous sun and the soft green grass and delicate flowers of the glorious Old World—before the Great Wars and man's self-imposed exile underground. But they were older now. It was time to be practical and stop believing in fairy tales.

"Mine doesn't say anything about the sun," Pescha said after a moment, closing her book defiantly.

"Mine either," Corah admitted sadly.

Jana frowned in frustration. "Well, it's *true*," she said hotly, slamming her book closed angrily. A few others in the Bookroom turned around at the noise. Jana lowered her voice. "I don't care what these books say. The sun is real, and I'll prove it, too."

"How?" Pescha asked incredulously. Corah was skeptical as well, but she knew that Jana would not give up her romantic dreams without a fight.

"I'll find the Wooden Gate."

Corah almost joined in Pescha's laughter, but she forced herself to restrain her disbelief. Jana glared at them both. "According to the Ancients, the Wooden Gate is the only exit to the Surface. They said it was just beyond the border of Calderan."

Pescha humphed loudly and rose to her feet. "I'm going home to write my essay. I suggest you grow up and write about facts rather than fairy tales." Then, taking her notation book and lantern, she stormed from the Bookroom.

Corah looked at Jana sadly. A dusky haze settled around the girls in the absence of

Pescha's lantern, but even in the faded light, Corah could see the hurt in Jana's dreamy eyes.

"I'm staying here to write," she said, preferring to make use of the table's small lantern rather than waste her oil ration lighting her own. She tried to think of something comforting to say, but failed.

Jana nodded mutely and the girls fell into a diligent quiet. They finished their essays separately and silently, neither making any more mention of the Surface, the sun or the Wooden Gate.

* * *

Shadows flickered and danced across the paper as the small candle flames lighting the corner shifted in response to Corah's breathing. The girl lay on her stomach across her sleeping mat, studiously completing her Calculations assignment and trying to ignore her mother's pained sighs each time she filled another precious piece of paper with computations and was forced to use—or in her mother's eyes, waste—another. Finally, annoyed, Corah gathered her notation book, pen and lantern and announced she was going to the Bookroom to finish her homework.

Entering the Bookroom, Corah was surprised to see Jana sitting in the corner and even more surprised to see her surrounded by books. None of that evening's assignments required research.

Corah's notation book thudded softly against the stone tabletop as she joined Jana at her book-littered table. "What are you doing?" she asked curiously.

"I'm trying to figure out how to get to the Wooden Gate," Jana replied, looking as though the answer had been obvious.

Corah's eyebrows rose incredulously. "You were *serious* about that?"

"Of course."

"Shouldn't you be doing something else? Like your homework?"

"I'll copy yours."

Corah gave Jana a stern look of disapproval, but the other girl did not notice as she shoved a book across the table. "Read that paragraph," she said, pointing.

Corah took the book obediently and read aloud:

"After the second cycle of the third Great War, the remnant that occupied the northern sector began preparations for the Exile. They removed themselves from the Surface—thirty-nine women and twenty-two men; sixty-one they totaled. They descended below to the Underground Dwelling they had prepared. They remained below the Surface for ninety days before attempting the Return. Upon reaching the Surface, they found destruction—a barren, uninhabitable world. Unable to return to the Surface, they erected a Wooden Gate barring the passage back to the Old World and continued their journey underground. Ten kilometers from the Gate, they founded the city of Calderan…"

"That's it," Jana said triumphantly. "Ten kilometers from where they founded Calderan. And according to legend, the city was founded where the Central Room now is."

"According to *legend*," Corah reemphasized. "You're basing this entire idea on a bunch of fairy tales."

Jana ignored her as she opened another book, revealing a map of the corridors and share-spaces of Calderan. She had drawn a circle on the map with a ten-kilometer radius from the Central Room. "I figure the Gate can't be this way because that runs into the border of Ranuk. And it can't be this way because that's where the mines are. So it must be at the end of the

Southwest Passage."

Corah studied the map doubtfully, and then shook her head. "That's impossible. The Southwest Passage doesn't run ten kilometers from the Central Room. It doubles back to the city long before that."

"On *this* map it does," Jana agreed, a mysterious smile creeping onto her face. "But look at this one." She placed another book beside the first so the maps were side-by-side.

Corah compared the two maps. Her eyes widened in surprise. The second map indicated that a small corridor branched off the Southwest Passage, leading further away from the city. Leading to what was unclear. There were no marked destinations at the end of the corridor.

"Where did you get this book?" Corah asked, flipping it closed so she could look at the cover. It was so old that the name had been completely erased.

"It was at the back of the shelf, behind the other books. Anyway, my guess is that the Wooden Gate is at the end of that corridor. So this weekend, we'll take the train to Calderan—"

"*We*?" Corah interrupted.

Jana looked hurt. "I thought you'd want to come." Corah sighed but did not answer, so Jana continued. "We'll take the train to Calderan, follow the Southwest Passage, find the hidden corridor and look for the Wooden Gate."

Corah looked at her dubiously. "That simple, huh?"

Jana shrugged. "It's worth a try." She looked at Corah with hope-filled eyes until at last the other girl nodded her consent.

* * *

As her footsteps fell on the train's platform, Corah looked at Jana, hoping to see some indication that she had changed her mind, but Jana appeared as eager and resolute as ever. With every step onto the train, Corah told herself she did not have to go. With every passing moment of the ride to Calderan, she thought of backing out. But when she looked at Jana's dreamy face, she knew she could not go home.

Still, she remained overwhelmingly skeptical. It seemed doubtful, if not impossible, that in all these years, no one had found the Wooden Gate. It seemed even more unlikely that they would be able to find it themselves. When Corah voiced these questions to Jana, however, Jana appeared undaunted. "Maybe no one's looked," she said.

So Corah sat back, allowing herself to fall into the rhythmic swaying of the train, preparing herself for a long, fruitless journey.

All too quickly for Corah, the train arrived in Calderan and Jana led them through the city. They followed the signs to the Central Room, and then took the exit for the Southwest Passage. As it was time for the midday meal, there were very few people about. Corah felt a slight sting of hunger and wished she had thought to bring some food. As it was, the girls had very little with them. Each wore a small lantern hung on a strap across her chest. Jana had a traced copy of the map in her pocket and she held a compass in her hand. Corah carried an extra flask of oil next to her lantern.

The girls' hurried footsteps pattered against the stone floor as Jana's eagerness sped them down the passageway. Small, mounted wall-lanterns lit their path, revealing signs and exits leading to the intricate labyrinth of living quarters and share-spaces.

Their journey progressed in relative silence. Corah tried to start a few conversations, but Jana had a way of twisting every topic back to the Surface and the Old World. Eventually,

Corah gave up the idea of small talk and followed obediently but grudgingly after Jana.

They had been walking for nearly six rotations and Corah was about to suggest for the third time that they turn around and go home when Jana's pace slowed, and then stopped as she stared at her compass. "The passageway is starting to turn back toward the city. The corridor should be around here somewhere." She placed a hand on the right wall and began walking again, letting her fingers glide roughly along the chiseled wall.

Corah followed silently, hoping that if they followed the passageway until it returned to Calderan that Jana would agree to give up her search and go home.

"Here!" Jana said suddenly. "Look!"

Corah looked and saw nothing. This part of the wall looked just like any other. "Feel this—it's not stone," Jana said, grabbing Corah's hand and placing it next to her own.

Recoiling in surprise, Corah gasped. Jana was right. Instead of cold stone, she had found some sort of heavy tapestry, colored to look like the walls around it. In the dim light, it was visibly indistinguishable from the rest of the corridor.

Corah reached out tentatively to touch the wall again, but Jana was quicker. She had already pulled the tapestry back and had stepped into the void beyond.

"Light your lantern," she called, her voice muffled slightly.

Corah hurriedly unclasped her lantern and brought the small light to life. After a brief hesitation, she stepped behind the tapestry and found Jana anxiously attempting to light her own lantern in the dark. As soon as both lights were lit, the girls looked around.

They were in a narrow corridor. But instead of the smooth, refined hallways they were accustomed to, the floor and walls were rougher, giving the feel of a tunnel rather than a corridor.

Jana stepped forward slowly, holding her lantern in front of her. Corah was more cautious, but curiosity forced her forward as they made their way down the mysterious passageway.

Corah matched her footsteps with Jana's and stayed close behind her. She was so close that the girls collided when Jana came to an abrupt halt. Corah did not need to ask why they had stopped as both girls caught their breath. Before them stood the Wooden Gate.

The Gate was simple, not ornate and elaborate the way Corah had heard it described in bedtime stories. She had imagined it would be massive—at least five meters high. Instead, it was barely two and a half meters; unimpressive, yet strangely captivating.

"It's true," Corah breathed airily.

Jana nodded, momentarily unable to speak. When at last she found her voice, she was grinning ecstatically. "Come on!" she said, dragging Corah forward.

After a second's hesitation, they found the handle and pulled. The door resisted briefly, but as the girls pulled harder, it slowly released its hold on the stone walls.

The girls stepped forward into a room so large that their small lantern lights were swallowed by its immense darkness. With their limited visibility, they could see several wooden chairs and a row of empty shelves.

"This must be the Underground Dwelling where the remnant first stayed," Jana said breathlessly. Corah could only nod in mute awe.

Jana ran her fingers along the smooth back of a nearby chair, imagining a world that could create such a wondrous thing. Then, unable to resist the temptation of the unexplored room, she began slowly walking the perimeter. Afraid of being left alone, Corah followed, both shaky hands tightly clutching her lantern.

Cautiously, they circled the room. Jana touched everything as if trying to absorb the very essence of the Old World through her fingertips. Corah's heart beat recklessly as she avoided any physical contact with the items that littered the floor. The remains of a forgotten world made her nervous and she jumped when Jana grabbed her arm.

"Look," Jana said hoarsely, her whisper reverberating in the open room. She was pointing to a row of foot holes chiseled into the wall. She raised her lantern revealing more holes leading upward. Though they could not see the end of the holes, both girls knew where they led.

"The Surface," Jana gasped. Confidently, eagerly, she turned off her lantern, attached it to its strap and began to climb.

Corah hesitated, trapped between the fear of the unknown Surface and terror at being left in the dark, empty room on her own. Her breath quickened to sharp gasps as she placed her hands in the foot holes and pulled herself upward.

She climbed until she felt Jana's stationary foot in the next hole. "What happened?" she asked, her voiced etched with a hint of panic.

"We're at the top," Jana grunted, as if struggling against some unseen force. "There's a door or something."

There was a slight sound of movement and scraping, and then suddenly the most brilliant light Corah had ever seen burst through the ceiling. She shut her eyes against the brightness, but still she could feel piercing rays through her closed eyelids. She heard Jana moving above her and, eyes still firmly shut, Corah followed.

Her hands brushed against something metallic and she pulled herself through the opening. Crawling forward, she felt an intricate prickling of uncountable strands of smooth softness.

This must be grass, she thought to herself, forcing a single eye to open a sliver so that the vivid green shades filled her sight. Despite the pain, she squinted her other eye, surveying the ground through slits of vision.

Corah glided her fingers through the marvelous grass, causing the stalks to dance under her touch. Slowly she opened her eyes as they became accustomed to the merciless brightness of the sun.

From her still-crouched position, she looked up and saw Jana standing with her arms spread wide and her face turned upward as if to maximize the amount of her body that could be kissed by the sun's rays.

Corah felt a soft bead of sweat roll from her temple and remembered that the light-giving sun had also provided the Old World with heat. She removed her outer shirt, wondering if she had ever before been so warm.

While Corah remained huddled by the entrance making a visual exploration, Jana ran about touching and experiencing everything. She rolled gleefully in the long grass; she carefully plucked a flower from its stalk and placed it gingerly in her pocket; she held her face into the revitalizing wind.

Corah looked about cautiously, not sure what to make of the Surface. She had never seen such radiant colors. The flowers that dotted the thick green grass were like brilliant splashes of paint on an emerald canvass. The shimmering blue sky gave the unsettling feeling of openness and emptiness and the fiery sun was both wondrous and terrifying.

Turning away from the vast sky, Corah returned her full gaze to the ground. She noticed that the grass she was sitting on was short and bent while the grass nearby where Jana played was more than knee-high. Following the short grass with her eyes, she found that it formed a

path through the sea of swaying blades, leading away from the entrance.

"Trees!" she cried suddenly, pointing in the distance.

Jana stopped spinning and looked up. "Let's go," she urged, emerging from the high grass to follow the path.

Corah felt as if her heart were being dragged forward with Jana. She did not want to leave the security of the entrance, but neither did she want to be left alone on the strange Surface. Finally, she stood and followed.

As they walked down the path, the girls could see the tall, majestic trees approaching, but long before they reached them, they found short stumps of trees with smooth flat tops that barely reached the girls' knees.

Jana stopped to touch the round ringed surface. "I wonder if they grow like that or if the tops fell off," she thought aloud.

Corah looked around, but since she did not see the missing treetops, she assumed that these trees had stopped growing before they developed the long, tall trunk and shimmering leaf-filled tops. She had never heard or read of trees like these, but nothing about the Surface was the way she had pictured it.

She did not have long to think about the strange, short trees because Jana was moving forward again. The path ended, but the girls stepped forward through the chaotic grass to stand beneath the magnificent trees.

There was something comforting about the canopy of branches over her head and Corah was thankful for the myriad of leaves that blocked the sun's piercing brightness, allowing it to pass through them in tolerable patches. She liked it here under the trees, but the constant rustling of the wind forcing the numerous leaves to bat and sway against each other was unnerving.

Jana laughed and turned to Corah. "Can you imagine what could be made with so many trees? Paper would be as cheap as stones. No more rationing, no more books being pulled for recycling."

She ran from tree to tree, pressing her face and hands against each one as if looking for a heartbeat inside. Even Corah summoned the courage to reach out her tentative finger and brush the coarse, dark bark.

Finally, Corah spoke the words they both knew were true. "We should go."

Jana nodded in pained agreement and slowly they followed the path back to the entrance. Corah descended first back into the Underground Dwelling. Jana followed reluctantly. When she shut the entrance, blocking out the last hint of sunlight and plunging the room into darkness, she gave a low, hurt whimper.

Once her feet were firmly planted on the stone floor and her lantern relit, Corah's tense muscles relaxed. The Surface had been incredible, but there was comfort in the embrace of darkness and the coolness of the stone walls.

Silently, they followed the perimeter of the room back around to the Wooden Gate and stepped back into the corridor. As the Gate thudded softly but resolutely behind them, Jana turned to Corah. "We have to tell someone."

Corah agreed. "But who?"

"The Precinct Director of Calderan?"

Corah nodded and led the way through the corridor. When they emerged from the tunnel, Jana removed her shoe and smashed one of the mounted wall lamps near the camouflaged tapestry. Glass and sparks showered to the floor marking the spot. They followed the Southwest

Passage back to the city, running when they could, and then walking, holding their cramped sides until they could run again.

From the Central Room, they followed the signs to the Director's offices and loudly rang the hand bell outside the entrance. A guard appeared momentarily, looking annoyed.

The girls stumbled over each other as they eagerly told their story. "We followed the Southwest Passage and found a hidden corridor," Corah gasped.

"We found the Wooden Gate and saw the Surface," Jana added through her labored breathing.

"And saw the sun and the sky."

"And trees and—"

The guard shook his head. "Don't waste my time with fairy tales. There is no Surface." Without another word, he disappeared back into the office.

The girls looked at each other. "Now what?" Jana asked.

"We go home," Corah said sadly.

* * *

Corah slept most of the train ride home. When she woke, Jana was awake beside her, staring intently at nothing. Corah wondered if the other girl had slept at all.

Over the next week, the girls said nothing to each other or anyone else about their journey to the Surface. There were no words to say. But Corah watched with growing concern as Jana became increasingly distant and distraught.

Corah lay on her sleeping mat trying to recall the image of the sky. For her, the Surface was like a fading nightmare that, with the increase in temporal distance, became less and less frightening until it became more of a fond memory. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she ignored the ringing of the hand bell outside her quarters.

Corah's mother stood over her, blocking the light from a nearby lantern. "Jana's here to see you. She looks upset."

Sitting up quickly, Corah hurried into the corridor. Jana did indeed appear to be upset.

"They're gone!" she whispered fiercely, pain and panic filling her face. "They took them." She grabbed Corah's arm and began pulling her down the corridor.

"What's gone? Who took them?" Corah wrenched her arm free and quickened her pace to walk by Jana's side.

"My books. The ones about the Surface. They're gone—all of them."

"Recycled?"

"That's what the Bookkeeper said."

Corah followed Jana to the Bookroom. Just as she had said, every book related to the Surface was gone. While it was not uncommon for books to be pulled for recycling, it was unusual for an entire subject to be removed.

Falling to her knees beside the empty shelf, Jana stared forlornly at the space that had once held her precious books. Not having any words of wisdom or comfort, Corah stood awkwardly and silently by her side.

* * *

Another week passed. Corah and Jana talked very little, so Corah was surprised when

Jana passed her a note in class. *Bookroom—after school.* She was even more surprised to see Pescha receive a similar note.

After class, filled with curiosity, Corah met Jana in the Bookroom. Pescha arrived soon after and the girls sat down.

Jana looked around the table dramatically and then broke her silence. "Corah and I have been to the Surface."

Pescha laughed loudly, but a look at Corah's serious face quieted her.

"And," Jana continued, "I intend to return."

"When?" Corah asked, more eagerly than she had meant. Pescha rolled her eyes.

"I get my allowance the first of the month."

"Me, too," Corah said. Pescha remained silent. Corah wondered if she even received an allowance or if her parents simply bought her everything she wanted.

"I know it's over a week away," Jana said heavily, "but that's as soon as I can afford a train ticket to Calderan. Anyone who wants to come too can meet me at the train station on the first." With nothing more to say, Jana left the room in an airy haze, leaving Corah and Pescha staring at one another.

* * *

Nine days later, all three girls boarded the train to Calderan, Pescha complaining loudly the entire trip.

As soon as the train arrived, Jana led the group through the city. Corah tried to ignore the look of surreal ecstasy on Jana's face and instead focused on the fact that this was the happiest she had seen Jana in the weeks since they had seen the Surface.

Jana led the other girls confidently through the corridors, guiding them verbally as well as physically. "We are taking the Southwest Passage now—the same route the remnant took in their Exile from the Surface." Her words became more rapid and more eager with every step. When she ran out of things to say about the journey, she began talking about what life would be like once they lived on the Surface again. "The Magistrate won't be able to control us anymore because there won't be any need for rationing. Everyone can have as much space as they want, too. We'll build houses and beds and chairs, just like in the Old World."

Finally Corah heard the soft crunch of glass under their feet and knew they had arrived at their landmark. She looked up, but could not distinguish which of the lanterns Jana had broken. It had already been repaired.

Jana felt carefully along the wall while Pescha sighed loudly and impatiently. After a moment, she lit her lantern to observe the wall more closely. She gasped in disbelief. Just past the scattering of broken glass, the wall contained a portion that appeared to have been filled by large rocks. Jana tried to pull them aside, but they were firmly placed.

"It was right here," she said, shaking her head. "They've blocked it. They don't want us to go. They don't want us to be free."

Pescha sighed loudly. "Are you *sure* there was an entrance here?" she asked, her voice saturated with skepticism. Both Jana and Corah nodded fervently. "And it led to the Wooden Gate?" Jana's second nod was equally emphatic. Corah's was less convincing. "And you saw the *Surface*?" Jana nodded again. Corah did not.

Brow furrowed with thought, Corah tried to recall what had happened. She remembered waking up on the train ride home. Was it possible that it was all a dream?

"It seemed so real," she said dejectedly.

"It *was* real," Jana insisted in desperation.

Pescha rolled her eyes and shook her head. "I'm going home."

Corah looked at Jana with a hopeless expression. She wanted so badly for the stories to be true, but faced with a solid wall where moments earlier she had expected to find a tunnel strained her ability to believe.

"Wait!" Jana called suddenly. "My flower." She thrust her hand into her pocket as Corah's head rose in hopeful anticipation.

Jana opened her hand eagerly, but the once brilliant flower had crumbled with her touch. Silent sobs shook her body as Jana closed her fist tightly and let the dust sift through her fingers and onto the stone floor. Corah watched in crushed agony as Jana sank to the ground to morn the lost and forgotten world.

The End

Amy M. Smith is a high school teacher. She lives in Texas with her husband and her cat.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 13

"You are not a seer," Maghreb yelled. "Your words have no power over me. I make my own future. Damn your prophecy. Damn your Law. I do not fear you or your Maker. If there is a Maker, then let him show himself and I will bow to him. If not, then I shall be my own Maker."

Somehow Nanexse had risen to her feet; her bloody hands still covered her eyes. "The Law would be your light, but you hate the light. You prefer the darkness because your heart is evil."

"The Law!" he shouted. The great white horse reared up and the ground shook when its hooves came down beside her. "What kind of Law punishes twenty generations for the rebellion of one man? What Law robs a people of their king in the year that his son is born?

"The Law offers us no hope, and so it and the Curse are one and the same. The seers used the Curse to rob Edom's kings of their lives. They said the Curse demanded the blood of Edom's kings or the demon Molekh will cross the mountains and lay waste to the land. Ha! The seers perpetuated this lie to insure that Edom has only child kings so the seers may rule through them."

He came closer and pressed the tip of his sword to Nanexse's neck. "When my father and the last seer died, no man had the courage to face my mother's wrath and declare himself seer. I have no use for a seer now."

He turned his horse back toward his officers and said, "If any of you believe that I should go meekly to die as my forefathers did then speak now." None of the dozen mounted men made any reply. "Good! The Law and the Curse are the shackles that have enslaved this land for too long. Today, we cast them off forever."

To one of his officers, Maghreb said, "Cut off her hair and lock her in a dog cage until I return."

"Hear me!" The words came out from her with power and certainty. Like a hand they reached out for Maghreb. The King's horse reared; he struggled to keep his seat while the charger spun around as if at her command.

"Raise the war cry, lords of Edom,
You will be shattered!
Devise your strategy, it will be thwarted;
Draw your swords against the flood,
You will be scattered!
Mourn Edom. Weep with your queen,
a humble daughter of the plains,
Her son sleeps and will not wake.
Now, Edom will have no king until the Last."

* * *

Five years later.

Nanexse emerged from the snow-dusted pines and stepped lightly onto the edge of the mountain road. She wore the patchwork coat she had made from white and gray rabbit pelts. Her pearl-white hair had grown long again, and the morning sunlight made it almost luminous. She would have still been beautiful but for the scars and her missing eye.

Perhaps a hundred yards farther up the road, just around the next bend, would be the perimeter wall with its iron gate. Nanexse hesitated, and then stepped back to the shadowed edge of the road to wait and watch.

Unbidden memories of her mother, father and younger sister, Ayn, pressed into her

mind—a last goodbye? Sweet, joyful Ayn. The thought of her brought a piercing ache to Nanexse's heart. In her mind her little sister had stayed ten summers old, but Ayn would no longer be a little girl. She would have turned fifteen last summer, her bride's age. She could be married, perhaps even… No! Nanexse struggled to push away the horrifying image from her dream. The picture of Ayn lying unmoving on the ground with a bloody gash across her swollen abdomen…and the newborn that was—No! It had not happened, nor would it come to be. It was not a true dream, only a product of Nanexse's fear of what the Maker had given her to do.

The snow-muffled rhythm of cantering hooves announced an unseen horse and rider climbing the ancient road. Sounds of creaking leather and jingling tack came next, but Nanexse did not move. When the horse appeared, it was not one of the small mountain ponies; this was a black warhorse over sixteen hands high at the withers. The lone soldier wore leather armor and a gray fur cloak. He focused on the road ahead. The leather wrapped hilt of a long sword bobbed behind his head. Nanexse's fear told her to slip further back into the shadows, but she did not. She stood her ground, daring the Maker to let her be slain there and then.

The great horse was breathing hard in the thin air. It came close enough for her to smell its musky sweat mixed with the fragrance of saddle oil and leather, but it did not slow. Nanexse could have reached out and touched the soldier's leg as he passed, but she did not. A moment later, horse and rider rounded the bend.

King Maghreb would not be happy to see the prophet he had once tried to kill. Unconsciously, she touched the deep hollow where her left eye had been. The sunken scar tissue of the old wound pulled her skin taut as though drawing in that side of her face. She had never worn an eye patch. Why should she? Muhaimin had been her only companion these five years, and the old gray wolf accepted her as she was. Nanexse's remaining eye was the startling blue of the Narrow Sea. In it something of beauty still persevered, a light beside darkness, hope beside sorrow.

This had not been the life or the end she had imagined. As a girl growing up on the broad plains, she had expected to become the wife of a farmer. She had dreamed of marrying a strong man full of laughter like her father, but that was not what the Maker had ordained for her.

She told herself again to be glad the hiding was over. Part of her even looked forward to seeing the fear in the king's eyes; not of her, but of the enemies who had driven him and the remnant of his army into the mountains. She looked up, half-hoping to see the black-winged demon already circling over the king's last refuge.

She approached the stone perimeter wall—more decorative than defensive at only ten feet in height—and found the black iron gates open. Only one tall pikeman stood in the entrance, his back to her. Where were all the soldiers that should be preparing for a siege? Perhaps the king would make his last stand at the cliff road. A shorter pikeman approached at a run from the large courtyard beyond. He came to a halt and the taller guard knocked him to the ground. The smaller man lost his pike and it clattered onto the slush covered cobblestones.

"Boy, you made me late for my breakfast," the big man bellowed. "If you are ever late to relieve me again, I will skewer you on the end of this pike."

As the soldier continued spewing threats and curses, Nanexse walked through the open gate and stopped a few paces behind him.

The smaller guard looked even younger than Nanexse, barely out of his boyhood. As he climbed to his feet, his eyes went wide. The second guard spun around, snapping his pike down to point it at her. His face turned white, as though he had seen a shape-shifter spring up out of the ground.

Nanexse was surprised by the fear in their eyes. "I have an audience with King Maghreb," she said, making her voice firm and formal to mask her own apprehension.

Both men glanced back across the empty, hoof-trampled grounds to the ancient Daystari hall. Yesterday, from her vantage point higher up the mountain, Nanexse had counted fifty horsemen and wondered if that was all Mahgreb had left. Her long Daystari seeing-tube had also shown a pregnant noblewoman dressed in rich furs and walking slowly in the courtyard. An older woman had walked beside her while two solders followed at a distance.

The older guard tried not to look at her face, but he could not take his eyes off her. "Get the captain," he yelled at the younger man.

"It's her! Stick her, Bakr! Pin her to the ground like a toad so she doesn't get away again."

Bakr took a half step back, jabbing the butt of his pike hard into the younger guard's stomach.

"Ow!"

"Get the Captain now, or I'll use the other end."

The young man scooped up his pike and ran toward the hall. Ahead and to the right of him, a man led a horse from the stables and mounted it. The boy quickly changed course and ran to him. After a quick exchange, the horse and rider sprinted to the gate. Even before the horse had come to a stop, the rider threw his leg over its neck and jumped down. Nanexse recognized Kahil. She wanted to find a sign of hope in his presence, but then she wondered how he could have stayed with the king these last five years. Surely the things he witnessed must have sickened him, or else they had corrupted him.

"Seer Nanexse," Kahil said with a tone of concern as he made a slight bow. "Why are you here?"

She heard no hostility in his voice. He reached out to the shaft of the guard's pike and directed its point upward.

"Captain," she said with respect. "I am here because our Lord Maker sends me again to the king."

Kahil's brow wrinkled and his eyes squinted with genuine worry. "He will kill you."

"It shall be as the Maker wills."

Nanexse offered her hand to Kahil and he took it in his own. The years of campaigns had hardened his face and body, but in his eyes she could see the same kindness he had shown that day in the capital.

That terrible day had been the last time she had seen Kahil, but she had wondered if he had had a part in her escape. She studied the man before her now. His hand felt rough in hers, and the cold mountain air had chapped his face. His two emerald green eyes held the gaze of her one eye, and he did not look at the other side of her face. His gaze showed regret and the effort of holding back some great sadness, but Nanexse found neither fear nor revulsion in it.

"Please, Kahil, take me to him again so I can be done with this last task."

After a long pause, he shook his head, and she thought he would refuse, but then he answered "Very well," and released her hand. Turning to the guards he said, "Hold my horse and stay at your post."

Nanexse walked quickly. She wanted to avoid any further conversation, though Kahil's eyes brimmed with the questions he wanted to ask. At the Hall, he opened one of the tall, outer doors. Intricately carved with all manner of beasts and fowl, the doors were three times her height, but she knew from experience they opened effortlessly. The Daysatri shape-shifters

would have faded into myth centuries ago if they had not left behind lasting testaments such as this.

Inside, a boy carrying a tray filled with two steaming bowls jerked to a stop, sloshing soup onto the tray. He stared open-mouthed at Nanexse. She smelled the peahen soup and her mouth watered. The boy regained his wits and hurried up the main staircase.

They went through a large open doorway into a ballroom. Across the long room, closed double doors led to what she called the glass room—the easternmost room of the ancient Hall. Nanexse remembered how its tall glass windows made the room seem to hang over the precipice of the high cliff. She knew that Maghreb would settle in that room. At the door, she turned to Kahil. He was slowly shaking his head as if conflicted.

Nanexse put her hand on his. "I must do this," she said.

After a long moment he nodded and said, "If you have a weapon, I must take it."

"I have none," she said, "but draw your sword. It will be better for you if the king sees your blade is bare and near my neck when we enter."

He nodded and drew the sword out, holding its edge near to her neck. The cold steel sent a chill through her body.

"He will not command you to be my executioner," she said. The word of knowledge had come unexpectedly to her mind, but she felt grateful to be able to offer Kahil that small comfort.

They entered by the doors on the western wall of the triangular room. Straight ahead, light streamed in through tall glass walls twenty feet high. There the room came to a point like the bow of a glass ship. The magnificent windows were a remnant of days that had since faded into legend. In the last five years, Nanexse had twice visited this hall while it was unoccupied. The first time she had stood there for hours, looking to the north where the falls plunged off the red cliffs and fell two thousand feet into the valley below.

King Maghreb and two of his officers sat talking around one end of a long, polished, black table. In front of the men, a map on Daystari paper was stretched out on the table, its curled edges anchored by white leather pouches of sand.

The king shook his head decisively. "No, no. Don't waste time exploring. Move through the High Pass quickly and bring me news of what lies beyond the edge of this ancient map."

"Forgive me, my King," Kahil interrupted with a formal and deferential voice. With one hand he gripped Nenexse's upper arm, and with his other he held his blade under her chin. "I found Seer Nanexse at the gate."

The king and his officers stood. Nanexse could see the years had changed Maghreb. Before, he had been an arrogant boy. Now, at twenty, he still looked arrogant, but he had grown to be a full head taller than his officers. He also had the broad shoulders and powerful arms of a man who practiced daily with a sword. No doubt he was an imposing figure on the battlefield. She searched his eyes for the fear of someone hunted, but she did not find it. Even after fleeing into the mountains, did he still believe that he would prevail against the enemies the Maker had set against him?

"At the gate, you say," Maghreb chuckled. "Thank you, Kahil. Take her coat just so we can be certain she has no hidden weapons. Then go and have someone bring two pairs of shackles."

The king took a sword from the man beside him and walked within easy reach of her. Kahil released her arm and sheathed his sword. Nanexse took off her small pack and coat and handed them to him. As he turned to leave, she looked into his eyes, offering silent thanks for his help.

"I am sent to bear witness to the fulfillment of the prophecy," Nanexse said, looking at the king.

Maghreb laughed contemptuously at her, and his officers laughed with him.

"Yes, your prophecy. I doubt there are many in Edom who remember your words, though I do. It still escapes me why any man would fear the words of a woman. Did you hear that I took the Southern Kingdom that summer? Perhaps that news did not reach you in your hiding hole here in the mountains?"

Nanexse felt bewildered. His words made no sense. Why was he so confident?

A smile of realization spread across Magreb's lips.

"What, did you believe Edom had fallen?" Another round of laughter filled the room before he continued. "In fact your prophecy of Edom's end only motivated me to prove it false. While you have wisely hidden your face from me, my armies have marched on the four kingdoms and united them into one. I have restored all our ancient borders. My reach even extends across the Narrow Sea to the Isles of Hout, which I now hold in trust for King Sayyad's tragically orphaned son."

Nanexse's mind reeled. She wanted to rebuke him, but no words came to her mouth.

The king continued, "Where are the enemies from land and sea that you said would flood the plains and level the cities? As my mother said, Seers are liars who have no power other than fear."

"The Maker does not lie. I have seen the army on the Western Plains. If that is not so, then why have you fled here into the mountains?"

"I flee from no one." Maghreb laughed. "It is my own army camped in the foothills. After the ice dam breaks and the Syne river floods we will cross over the High Pass and take the land that lies beyond these mountains."

Nanexse felt betrayed and angry. Five years she had waited in these mountains. Now she had been sent to the king only to find out that nothing in the first prophecy had come to pass. Why had the Maker sent her here? Feeling forsaken, she groped for a reason.

"As Seer, I am called to witness the birth of the heir," she said, but the authority was gone from her voice.

The king smiled at her self-doubt. "So, you have come here to welcome my son. Well, Seer," he said, punctuating the title with contempt. "As I recall, you also foretold that my heir would be born of a plainswoman like yourself. You were wrong again. The mother of my son is from the Isle of Hout."

He smiled again, winked at his officers and then leaned closer to her. "Perhaps, Seer, even then you had hoped I would sire my first child on you?"

Nanexse slapped him hard across the face. The king's closed fist smashed into her mouth. The force of the blow sent Nanexse sprawling across the floor.

Nanexse stood up, her mouth bleeding. She glared at him. "Son of Naharam, know that the one who dams the river Syne also holds back the flood that will engulf you. Your death is near and your son will never rule."

A loud knock at the door interrupted her, and two guardsmen entered. One carried two sets of iron shackles. The king waved them toward the Seer.

"I've had enough of this little reunion. Lock her up and guard her well. I want her returned to the capital for a public execution." Maghreb turned his back on her and sat down at the table.

Nanexse glared at the back of Maghreb's head as she wiped the blood from her mouth.

She had been trained as a healer, but if she had had a weapon, she would have used it.

A guard shackled her wrists and ankles and led her from the hall. Outside, bright sunlight worked at melting the snow. Like the Hall, the large stables showed no sign of their great age. Perhaps half of the fifty stalls were occupied by mounts.

They shoved her into an enclosed and lightless stall that smelled of hay and horse manure. Someone bolted the door from the outside. She felt like a fool. Sinking to the ground, she pulled her legs close to her chest and rested her forehead on her knees. She asked herself why she had assumed Maghreb's forces were on the run. "Because I wanted it to be true," she said aloud. "The Maker cares not for the pride of his prophets. Perhaps it is his will that I eat hay until Maghreb has been killed." Or until my own death, she thought.

Nanexse woke from a dreamless sleep to the sound of an elderly woman's voice whispering her name.

"Nanexse, can you hear me?"

Nanexse knew the voice of her friend and mentor. "Tara?"

"Yes, it is me. I did not believe it when Kahil told me that you were here."

The sound of Tara's voice brought a tear to her eye. "Tara, praise the Maker. It was you I saw walking in the courtyard."

Tara replied, "I never expected to see you again after you fled. Some said you were killed and I grieved. Now, somehow you are here, alive."

"Yes, for a short while yet."

"Are you hurt? There is a drop of blood by my feet."

"I'm well enough. I think Maghreb loosened a couple of my teeth, but I'll be fine. The sound of your voice is the only balm I need."

"Take my hand," Tara said as she slid her hand part way under the stall door.

Nanexa squeezed Tara's wrinkled fingers and felt the strength of the old healer squeezing back.

Tara's voice wavered as she spoke. "I wish I could unbolt this door and greet you properly. And, I am not the only one that will be overjoyed at seeing you, but not like this. I must talk with Maghreb. I will convince him that you are harmless and that he should release you."

"No, Tara. You don't know the danger. Don't put yourself in the path of his anger against me. You should be concerned for yourself and the young woman who carries the heir. One who is far greater than King Maghreb is angry, and the life of Maghreb's son will be forfeit as the price for the king's wickedness. Then the demon Molekh will come for the king."

"Oh no!" Tara said with a sharp intake of breath. "Nanexse, that young woman is Ayn, your sister. She is the one who carries Maghreb's child."

Nanexse yanked her hand away in shock. "No! You lie," she said in a harsh voice. Her mind reeled as if from a sharp blow. She stood up and began to pace in the near darkness.

"No, Maker, this cannot be," she cried out. "This is too much. I cannot bear it. Oh Ayn, dear Ayn." She moaned and fell to her knees by the door. Nanexse could hear the soft sobs of her mentor and friend. "How could this come to be?"

"It is all my fault. After you escaped and fled the city, I feared that Maghreb would search out your family, so I sent word to warn them they should leave Edom. When Maghreb went to the Isle of Hout posing as a grateful ally, I went as his Healer. He used treachery to kill the island king and take control of his fleet. By chance, I saw Ayn in the market place. She looked so much like you that I knew she must be your sister. I invited her to dine privately with me

at the palace. She did, and she told me that friends helped your family to travel to the port of Sidon. There they found passage to the Isle of Hout.

"She left very late… I told my servant to see her home safely, but the king met her on the stairs. Drunk with wine and his own success, he took her to his bed and raped her.

"Since your prophecy that his son would be born to a plainswoman, he has bedded only women born outside of Edom. None have given him an heir. Ayn's dress, the accent of her voice, made her appear as someone born in the Isles. When it became apparent she carried his child, he brought Ayn back to Edom. Still, she tried many times to run away. Now, her anger has been replaced by silence, and she says little, even to me."

As Tara spoke, the dream of Ayn also pressed on Nanexe's mind. Why had the Maker brought her here to see her sister die? Was she wrong in everything she believed about the Maker? Where was His mercy?

"You must get her away from here," Nanexse said. "Maghreb will kill her and her unborn son. I have seen it."

"No, that cannot be. He wants this child. And if it were true, what could I do? The king has her closely watched. Even if I got her out of the hall, she could not walk far into the mountains. And now she will not go without you."

At the end of the aisle of stalls, a door creaked open.

"The guard comes," Tara said.

"Tara. If you see an opportunity to flee with her, you must take it. Tell her I love her. Tell her to pray and trust in the Maker."

"I will," Tara said as she got up and walked away. Nanexse felt helpless. She paced and tried to pray but could find no words. What good was it to pray against what the Maker had already ordained? She came here prepared to give up her own life, but not the life of Ayn and her babe. In frustration, she pounded on the door and threw her shoulder into it, but it would not move. Now she did not want to die. At least not until Ayn was safe.

And what of the child? In her memory she went over and over the dream of Ayn, looking for a sign that it did not have to be. Much later, she closed her eyes to sleep and heard in the distance the familiar call of a wolf. She dreamed of Ayn again, but this time Ayn sat in a chair, singing as her newborn babe suckled at her breast. Nanexse knelt beside the dream-Ayn and asked, "Sister, which dream is true?"

Ayn paid no attention but only cooed to the babe. The infant pulled away from the milk-swollen breast and looked at Nanexse. "The Maker is true," the child said with the voice of a woman.

Three times in the night, she woke to the sound of clattering hooves crossing the courtyard. Then, just before dawn, she heard shouts and men running outside. The voices invaded the stables and men called to one another as they saddled horses and led them out.

"What news?" one man anxiously called to another.

"A messenger came from the capital. He killed two horses crossing the plains. The capital has fallen. A fleet of a thousand tall ships, each with three red sails and three rows of oarsmen, took the city in a single day."

"No, no," called another man. "My brother was in the hall when the messenger came in. He carried a message relayed from the east. An army so large that it filled the Wasea Valley has overrun the eastern kingdom. It reduced three cities to rubble."

"All of you shut up!" boomed a commanding voice. "The last rider assembled in the courtyard will be joining the infantry."

A few minutes later, the troops rode out. In the silence, Nanexse almost believed they had forgotten her. Then she heard the faint sound of panting outside her stall door. She knew the sound. "Muhaimin," she said, happy that the wolf had come. How could she get him to open the bolt that latched the door? Suddenly a strange blue light shone through the gaps between the planks of the door. Afraid, Nanexse stepped back.

The door opened and the soft blue light filled the stall. However, instead of the wolf, a giant—or at least a man taller than any she had seen—stooped to enter. He wore a long gray coat and held the blue light in a cupped hand, but there was no lamp or flame, simply light. His face was ageless, both ancient and young. His eyes were the eyes of the wolf. Somehow, this was Muhaimin. Nanexse rubbed her eyes, uncertain if this was a waking dream.

"Yes, wake up," the tall man said in a friendly voice. "Long I have been patient, but I have grown weary of watching while you have been so complacent these five years." His long and slender fingers reached for the shackles on her wrists, and the irons opened at his touch. His hand felt warm and real.

Muhaimin continued, "It's good to see you roused by your anger at Maghreb and your love for your sister. It is time you looked beyond yourself." He bent down on one knee and removed both ankle shackles. Still kneeling, he straightened and put a hand on her shoulder, his face level with her own. She looked into his gray eyes; a fierce green fire burned there. "The Maker's anger at Maghreb is greater than yours. He has seen all that the king and his like have done, both openly and in secret."

Overcome with awe, she fell to her own knees and touched her forehead to the floor. "You are a Daystari. Forgive me, Lord."

"Stand, Seer Nanexse," he said, sliding his large hands under her elbows and gently lifting her to her feet. "I am only a servant like you. Only the Maker is owed your homage."

He cupped her hands in the greater expanse of his own. "When the Maker gave me the task of watching over you, I did not expect that I would come to love you like a daughter and feel your love in return. Almost I had forgotten that your people are capable of loving someone other than themselves."

She wondered how she could have kept the company of a Daystari shape-shifter for five years and not known it.

He lifted her chin so that she would meet his eyes. "The Maker's love is far greater than yours or mine. He loves all his creation, but he shows his greatest love to humankind. For five hundred years the Maker's loving-kindness has fallen on them like rain, but your people are stiff-necked and most freely choose to be his enemies. Even now, in his anger, the Maker does not put an end to them but will graciously send a remnant into exile."

"But what am I to do?" she asked.

"Use your gift. You are the Seer; open your mind's eye and see. Then do all that you see to do."

"Will you come with me?"

"I can no longer watch over you. Time is short and I have my own task to complete." With that, he closed his hand and extinguished the light. Nanexse watched as Muhaimin the wolf trotted from the stable.

Outside in the dim predawn, she looked for Muhaimin, but he was gone. She ran toward the Hall, determined to find Ayn and Tara. She heard the sound of hooves on the road behind her and crouched on the ground, watching as two guards swung open the gates and a rider galloped through. The rider rode toward the stables but then turned sharply toward her,

spurring the horse as if to ride her down. She stood, hoping to dodge his charge at the last moment. Then she recognized Kahil. He reined the horse in to stop beside her.

"Seer, I was coming for you. King Maghreb has gone mad with anger at you." Kahil's earlier conflicted expression was gone; he had made a decision and now acted on it without hesitation.

"What has happened?" she asked

"There is fighting in the valley below. Late yesterday the army of Edom was defeated in the foothills by a far greater force. Their colors and armor are unknown to me. King Maghreb has rallied our remaining men to hold the cliff road. Now he is coming here and he has sworn to throw you from the cliff. I came to help you escape and return to your hiding place."

Nanexse thought of the men of Edom who lay dead or dying in the valley below. And not just those, but all who had died over the last five years to satisfy Maghreb's lust for power. With a flash of anger her voice lashed out. "No, Kahil. I am finished hiding. I will meet Maghreb when he comes, but first take me to my sister Ayn and the Healer Tara, then you must lead them to safety."

Surprise and then recognition flashed across Kahil's face as he saw the similarities between Ayn and Nanexse that he had missed before.

"Let's find them then. Get on," he said and he reached down to pull her up behind him. The horse surged forward and Nanexse grabbed Kahil's waist to keep from falling off.

They dismounted at the hall's outer door and Kahil led the way inside, moving with speed and purpose up a nearby staircase. In the hallway a single guard stood before a closed door, his sword drawn, a look of surprise and fear on his face.

"Captain Kahil, sir," the guard said with an unsteady voice as he pointed his sword at Nanexse.

"Sheathe your weapon." Kahil commanded. The man turned his short sword to the side but did not put it away; his eyes darted suspiciously between Kahil and the Seer.

Kahil continued, "Now leave your post, and report at the bottom of the cliff road."

"Sir, I cannot. The king personally ordered me, on pain of death, to guard this door and let no one pass until his return."

"Please," Nanexse said. She reached out to touch the guard's arm and he jerked it back. Kahil's fist crashed into the guard's jaw and he slumped to the floor. Nanexse went to the door and tried to open it, but the door was locked.

"Step back," Kahil said, and kicked the door hard; wood splintered and the door swung open.

Tara and Ayn stood in the center of the large sitting room. Ayn was changed and yet the same. Her eyes were dull, without the light Nanexse remembered, and her face had lost its round softness. Except for the large bulge of her pregnancy, her body was thin, almost gaunt. Waves of emotion swept over Nanexse. Her heart threatened to burst with joy and sorrow. Joy at seeing Ayn, but sorrow for what Ayn must have endured. Each sister reached out and they met in a fierce embrace.

"Nana, I always knew you were alive," Ayn sobbed.

"Forgive me for not trying to find you years ago," Nanexse replied. She placed a hand on Ayn's large protruding belly. "I am sorry you were hurt by him."

Ayn smiled bravely through her tears. "That is in the past. What is important now is that my child be protected from him."

Nanexse nodded. As her hand touched Ayn's belly the dream image of Ayn flashed in her

mind again and suddenly she knew its true meaning.

"We need to leave now." Kahil said, interrupting her thought.

"Then let's go," Tara said as she picked up her healer's bag and reached to take Ayn's arm.

Before they reached the bottom of the stairs, Nanexse saw in her mind an image of riders passing through the gate. "We cannot go out; Maghreb is at the gate. Come this way," she said and pointed to the doors to the glass room

Kahil did not question her. He led the women into the room and closed the doors behind them. The first pale light of predawn lit the room through the tall glass windows. Nanexse walked along one wood paneled wall then stopped. She ran her hand along the molding at waist level. With an audible click, a hidden door opened in the wall. They stepped single file into a tall but narrow hall. Kahil closed the door and darkness engulfed them.

It had been several years since Nanexse had explored the ancient Daystari hall, but she could still see it all in her mind. In the dark, she reached out for Ayn and took hold of her hand. "This way," she said, feeling the wall with her other hand as she went. When the wall ended at another corridor, she paused. Turning right, she took two careful steps, then reached forward with her foot and felt nothing.

"Stairs," she said. "Be careful, they are tall and steep."

They descended into even greater darkness and then followed another corridor left, then right. Nanexse smelled a whiff of fresh air and walked forward until her hand touched a cold iron door. Finding the handle, she turned it and pushed but it did not move. Kahil came forward. They pushed together, and the door let out a low metallic groan as it opened a foot or two. Predawn light, cold air and the distant sound of water came into the corridor.

The door was set back in a small rock alcove; a narrow path followed the cliff to the left—north toward the falls. Holding on to the door, Nenexse stepped out. On her previous visit, she had found the door yet had not been able to open it by herself. She had looked for this path from the viewing room but had found no sign of it.

She peered over the edge into the valley far below. Her heart pounded and her hand gripped hard on the door. Below, hundreds of points of light filled the valley. Campfires, she thought. She prayed that the path would lead back up the cliff rather than down into the valley below. Carefully, she stepped back inside.

"There is a path. I will go first, then you, Ayn, then Kahil, then Tara." Each one nodded.

Kahil reached for the large healer's bag Tara carried and said, "You should leave that behind. The path is too narrow."

"Kahil, I'd rather cut off my arm. Besides, I've carried this so many years that I'm more likely to lose my balance without it."

Ayn followed Nanexse out. She glanced down and gasped.

"Don't look down," Nanexse said, still holding her hand. "Look at me."

"I'm alright," Ayn said. Kahil followed next, holding the door as Tara emerged. The door closed tightly when Tara released it.

They took small steps along the narrow path. Perhaps three feet wide at first, the path often shrunk to less than two feet. Most of the time, a rock overhang hid them. Twice Nanexse caught sight of the glass room, thrusting out from the hall like the beak of a raptor.

Rocks of various sizes littered the path. Nanexse flicked a small one over the edge with her foot. The long silence that followed unnerved her. They continued until a waist-high boulder blocked the way. Because of her condition, Ayn had difficulty climbing over it. Kahil helped both her and Tara navigate across.

Ten yards further the path sloped sharply upward. Nanexse took two steps, then her feet slipped on sand and she pitched forward. Ayn screamed. Nanexse fell flat, her hands and body slapping down on the hard surface. One foot dangled over the edge. She waited for her heartbeat to slow. Then, easing up to her knees, she brushed the path clean as she crawled up. At last she stood and went back to take Ayn's hand. Kahil followed Ayn with a reassuring hand on her waist. Then he went back to help Tara.

At the top of the slope, Tara stopped, opened her bag, and knelt facing back down the path. She pulled out a glass vial.

"This might delay anyone who follows us," Tara said. She poured the vial out on the path. A clear liquid ran down the hard surface, coating it to the bottom. "I hope none of you get a rash anytime soon because now I have nothing to treat it."

The sound of the waterfall grew louder as they progressed. Then, as Nanexse edged around another corner, the noise surged, becoming almost deafening. Nanexse felt a mist falling on her. A few steps more and she could see the falls about fifty yards away. Here the path widened again; at its edge, an iron rail stood between her and the falls. Rust covered the surface of the rail so that it matched the color of the cliff face. Ten feet farther on, the rail joined the rock wall and the path ended.

The whole trek had taken ten or fifteen minutes, but it felt like an hour. Now they could not go forward and they dared not try to go back. Nanexse swallowed the curse that was rising to her lips. No, she thought, there is a reason for this. Lord Maker, what now?

As Ayn came around the corner, Nanexse drew her close and put an arm around her shivering body. "Rest here," she yelled over the roar of the falls. Ayn nodded and they sat down with their backs to the wall of rock.

Kahil walked along the railing, leaning out over it in a way that made Nanexse nervous. Then he turned with his back to the rail and looked up the cliff wall. They were about forty feet below the lip of the cliff.

"Come look at this," Kahil shouted with a grin; water from the heavy mist dripped from his nose and hair. She went to stand beside him and looked up the wall.

She shook her head at the sight. "If you think we can climb up that, you have more faith than me."

"No Seer, look again." Kahil stepped to the wall and reached up. He grasped a horizontal iron bar just above his eye level. Its color blended so well with the rock that she had not seen it.

Kahil pointed up higher. "See the other bars every three feet? It is a ladder."

"Praise the Maker," she said in relief.

"Kahil, I think you should go first, in case someone discovers us before we are all up. I will go behind Ayn and help her."

"No," he answered. "Ayn cannot lift her feet high enough to reach from one rung to the next. She will need to be lifted each time and you do not have the strength."

"He is right," Tara agreed.

Kahil pulled a long knife out of his boot and handed the hilt to Nanexse. "You go first and take this," he said.

Nanexse nodded and tucked the knife into her belt. "The sun will be up in a few minutes. Let's get into the forest before we are seen." She reached out for Tara's bag. This time Tara gave it up without complaint.

Kahil helped Nanexse up to the first rung, and she moved up several more rungs before turning back to watch. Kahil lifted Tara next and she climbed up with difficulty. Kahil spoke

into Ayn's ear for a moment. He crouched, wrapped one arm around her lower legs and lifted her until she could grab the second rung and kneel on the first. He steadied her as she stood up.

Kahil jumped to grasp the second rung and easily pulled himself up to stand beside Ayn. He nodded to her and she reached up with one hand to take hold of the third rung. Kahil squatted and lifted her again so she could put her feet on the next rung. He climbed that rung and they repeated the process. Satisfied, Nanexse climbed to the top to look around.

Her head peeked above the grassy lip of the cliff. She could probably crawl up from there but it seemed precarious. There should've been one more rung. She found it buried under the grass and uncovered it enough to provide two handholds. She climbed up over the edge and lay flat, listening. She heard the river. Lifting her head, she looked around.

About a hundred paces away, the road ran parallel to the cliff and entered the dense forest of tall pines that lay between the river and the perimeter gate. To her right the road went north a hundred yards to the ford in the river.

Tara reached the top rung, and Nanexse took her hand and pulled her up. As she did, she heard a man scream, the sound fading rapidly as he fell to the valley below. She looked down, relieved to see Ayn and Kahil continuing their arduous climb. Nanexse could not lean out far enough to be sure there was no one below them. Angry shouts came up from below and to her right. Someone was on the path. She guessed that one of them had slipped on the oil Tara had poured.

She crawled back to Tara. "We will be gone before they reach the ladder," she assured Tara.

A few moments later Ayn reached out and both Tara and Nanexse pulled her up onto the grass. Kahil followed, breathing hard.

He got to his knees and scanned the area. Then he stood up, drawing his sword from his back and reaching with his other hand to help Ayn to her feet. "We have to move into the cover of the forest. If they were on the path below, then they may also be searching here."

They had gone only a few steps when three riders emerged from the trees, their horses galloping hard on the road. Maghreb's white charger turned off the road first and headed toward them. Nanexse knew they had nowhere to run. She pulled the knife from her belt.

"Move back closer to the edge," Kahil commanded. "That will keep them from running us down with the horses."

The riders pulled their horses to a hard stop just in front of them and all three dismounted with swords drawn. The horses nervously stepped back farther from the cliff. Maghreb approached, and his two personal guards moved between the king and Kahil.

Nanexse stepped out from behind Kahil to face the king. The knife felt heavy and awkward in her hand. Maghreb moved to his left, putting more distance between himself and Kahil. He looked back and forth between Nanexse and Ayn, then shifted his gaze to Tara.

"Healer, tell me you did not know these two are sisters, or are they close cousins?"

"Sisters," Ayn answered with pride in her voice, stepping up beside Nanexse. "Will you kill me, Maghreb, and kill your own son?" Nanexse reached out to take hold of her sister's hand.

Maghreb spoke with a low growl. "There has been no birth, so I have no son."

Behind Nanexse and across the valley, an angry, red sun edged above the mountains. In one swift motion Maghreb stepped forward and swung his sword in a sweeping arc meant to cut Ayn in half.

"No!" Tara screamed in rage.

Time slowed for Nanexse as it did when a vision would overtake her. She stepped back,

pulling at Ayn's arm as she did. The sword arced through the air, red sunlight glinting on its polished metal. Ayn fell backwards, the sword slicing through her clothes and abdomen. A strand of bright red pearls leapt into the air, following the arc of the blade, which glinted in the sunlight. Maghreb completed the bloody swing and looked at Nanexse with triumph.

As her sister's body slumped to the ground, Nanexse heard the clash of Kahil's sword behind her. The king stepped toward her and made a fierce, backhanded swing at her neck. She ducked, raising the knife to block the sword's long blade. Metal struck metal and pain shot through her wrist; the knife twisted out of her hand and tumbled into the grass. Nanexse fell forward, seeing Maghreb's boot just before it struck. Pain reverberated in her head; everything turned gray and then black.

Nanexse looked up from where she had landed, sprawled on her back. She focused on a dark speck circling in the sky far above her. It began to fall, like a blackbird diving down on her from a great height.

"Get away from her!" Tara screeched.

Nanexse heard Tara's yell and lifted her spinning head, forcing herself to sit up. She saw the king step back from Ayn's limp form; something red dangled from his hand. He lifted up the limp, bloody body of an infant, holding it by one ankle; the severed life-cord swayed below its unmoving head.

Sweeping her hand through the grass, Nanexse grasped the knife and struggled to stand.

A deep rumble shook the ground. The horizon tilted sharply and Nanexse stumbled backwards. Kahil came into her field of vision. He lay still, slumped across the body of one guard. Kahil's head glistened red and wet. She didn't see the other guard. Perhaps Kahil had thrown him off the cliff.

Nanexse caught her balance and brought her vision to bear on the king as he yelled at her, saying, "Here is your sacrifice."

She threw the knife even as Maghreb flung the tiny body out over the cliff's edge.

The knife's blade cut across Maghreb's throat. He reached up to cover the wound with his already bloody hand. Shifting his grip on his sword, he moved toward Nanexse.

A scream like the sound of a thousand eagles pierced Nanexse's eardrums. A blast of wind knocked her to her hands and knees. Huge, black, beating wings passed just over her head. The demon Molekh's head and back was a forest of sharp horns. Rough hide, blacker than coal, covered its massive reptilian body and stretched between the long bones of its wings. Hungry, red eyes glanced back at her as the talons of one foot wrapped around Maghreb and lifted him into the air. He hacked at its feet with his sword but the demon paid no heed. Climbing into the sky, it flew westward, toward the jagged mountains guarding the High Pass.

"Get my bag!" Tara shouted. "She is alive." Tara knelt beside Ayn, her hands on Ayn's stomach. Blood and birth-fluid had spilled on the ground beside her.

Nanexse ran to grab the healer's bag from where it lay near the cliff's edge. When she returned, she was astounded to see Tara pull a small infant body from Ayn's open wound. Tara opened her bag and pulled out a thin tube. She put it into the back of the infant's mouth and sucked. She turned to spit mucus on the ground and then sucked again. A moment later, the child began to cry.

"Keep her warm," Tara commanded as she cut the umbilical cord with small scissors. Nanexse unbuttoned the top of her shirt, held the baby against her chest and buttoned her shirt again.

"I need clean cloth," Tara said calmly, as she pressed down on Ayn's stomach with one hand and rummaged in her bag with the other.

Nanexse stood up and looked around. Kahil and one guard lay still and silent. Both had cloaks but they were not clean. She looked for the horses, and spotted them standing where the road entered the river. A gray blur leapt into the shallow river from the far side. With two more bounds, the enormous wolf landed beside the horses, but they showed no fear. It turned and sprinted toward Nanexse; the horses following. When the great wolf stopped beside her, it shape-shifted into the ageless giant in his gray coat.

"We must hurry; more soldiers are coming," Muhaimin said as he knelt beside Tara. "Let me help, Healer." He rested one hand on Ayn's chest and the other on Tara's shoulder.

"I've slowed her heart to reduce the bleeding. Remove the birth sack and sew her up." Muhaimin lifted his hand from Ayn; her eyelids fluttered but did not open. He pinched together the ragged edges of the long cut while Tara sewed. The wound had stopped bleeding at his touch and the edges fit together neatly as she sewed. When Tara was finished, Muhaimin took off his coat and Tara covered Ayn with its warmth.

Nanexse and Muhaimin hurried over to Kahil. "He is still alive," the giant said.

Muhaimin placed his hand on the bloody gash in Kahil's forehead. Kahil moaned and opened his eyes. When Muhaimin took his hand away, the bleeding had stopped.

"Who is that?" Kahil rasped.

"Lie still," Nanexse said, and caressed Kahil's stubble-covered cheek with her hand.

"This wound is deep," Muhaimin said. "He will also need the healer's needle and thread."

Nanexse reached a hand up toward the giant's kind face. He leaned down and she kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you," she said.

"You are welcome," he replied. "Now we must hurry. Edom's army has been defeated and the road is taken. The ice-dam has also broken. We must leave before flood and foe are upon us."

Muhaimin carried Ayn while Nenexse and Tara helped Kahil onto a horse. The two women rode close on either side of him to be sure he stayed in the saddle. They reached the road as the first enemy rider splashed into the river. At least twenty more riders followed close behind. Their bright red uniforms, pointed silver helmets and small horses looked strange to Nanexse.

The distant roar of an avalanche came from higher up the mountain. An enormous wall of water, more than fifty feet high, raced toward them. It spread out, ripping trees from the ground, splintering them and catapulting them into the air. Massive boulders bounded down the hill with them.

"Fly!" Muhaimin shouted. Nanexse barely heard him over the roar.

They fled. Somehow, even as he carried Ayn, Muhaimin's long legs kept pace with the galloping horses. Nanexse looked back as the flood swept up the pursuing horses with their riders and threw them far out over the cliff. Then, amidst the deafening roar, Nanexse heard trees splintering close by and felt a hail of heavy drops of water falling on her. Their horses ran and did not stop until they passed through the open gate and reached the door of the great hall.

* * *

At sunset, she and Kahil found the giant, Muhaimin, sitting on a couch in the glass room. He leaned forward, looking out to where the flooding river poured over the cliff and fell into the

valley below. Nanexse carried the sleeping babe, rocking her gently. Kahil moved two more chairs near the windows. Nanexse sat closest to Muhaimin.

"Did the flood destroy the army of the East?" she asked in almost a whisper.

"Most that were in the valley below and in the canyon beyond are surely dead. You are in no danger. However, that is only a tiny part of the greatest army the world has ever seen. The rest are on the plains and in the cities. Now the men of the east rule the Four Kingdoms, and it is but a small part of their empire."

Muhaimin looked out at the falling water again as if remembering something from long in the past. Finally, he turned back to Nanexse and the child.

"May I?" asked Muhaimin, pointing to the babe. Nanexse handed the child to him. The infant looked incredibly tiny and fragile as the giant cradled her in his cupped hands. He touched her face with his long finger and began to sing. It was a sad melody. The Daystari sang with a deep voice, both haunting and beautiful. His words spoke of death, mourning, and the fall of Edom. The music pierced Nanexse's heart, releasing a flood of tears. She felt Kahil put his arm around her, and she leaned into him.

The song faded into silence, and then Muhaimin began a new song. The words told of a long journey to a strange land, where a place had been prepared for them. His clear voice rose with hope and lifted Nanexse's heart out of darkness and into a new light.

The End

David Eland is a forty-something father of four who recently returned to writing fiction after a twenty-year hiatus. His stories often reflect his interest in philosophy and theology. The seed for this story came from a J. R. R. Tolkien quote, "All great stories are about the Fall."

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 16

"Why don't we leave?" she asked.

"Where would we go? Who's doing work like this?"

Jaena chose not to offer the obvious answer: no one. Lawrence knew this. Jaena knew this. Reilly certainly knew this.

"It's time to get started," she said.

"We're ready," he replied.

"What's the subject?"

"Dog. We're going into its Lateral Geniculate Nucleus."

"The LGN," Jaena repeated, and she resisted the urge to slap Lawrence's desk. "This is pointless. His control population is already big enough for statistical significance."

"You killed his goldfish," Lawrence reminded her. Before she could respond, he said, "Do you remember when Reilly first mentioned the possibility of psychosurgery?"

"Lawrence," Jaena began.

"Do you remember?"

Jaena nodded. "We both worked at St. Jude. We were young."

"It was only ten years ago."

"I feel old now," she said.

"Yeah," Lawrence agreed. "I do too. But still, when Reilly showed us this interface he created, when he showed us that we could connect the inner world of our conscious to that of another being's …" Lawrence's voice trailed off. His hand dropped from his pendant.

"Don't be so dramatic, Lawrence." Jaena replied. "Reilly just created a signal response system that was past the previous technology. We were the ones who helped him develop this." She pointed to the machinery behind her. "Besides, it's not so extraordinary now, is it? He's not willing to move past the mundane."

"We still don't understand the mundane," Lawrence countered. Jaena ignored him.

"Go there, record that, write the paper," she concluded. "There's no adrenaline here anymore."

"What do you want, a Nobel Prize of your own?"

Jaena shrugged. "I don't care about that. I don't care about Reilly's 'Comparative Anatomical Correlates as They Relate to Human Embryonic Manifestations: Are Dogs Color Blind? and Other Questions.' It's time to pull out."

"You don't know anything about that," Lawrence reminded her. "You always push. You always will push."

"You always follow me."

Lawrence actually achieved a small smile. "Oh yeah, honey. You know I want to be you when I grow up."

"Instead, you've grown up doing Reilly's scrub work."

"And you're with me," he reminded her. "It's your temper. It's always your temper." His smile faded.

Jaena stared at the floor. "Can we start now?" she asked.

"We're ready," Lawrence repeated. Jaena placed her head into the interface mechanism; she tried not to notice the probe that deployed itself into her own receptor port, located above the temporal lobe on her left side. It was so small that her hair covered the port, but it was the most advanced technology humans had to offer. Lawrence had helped Reilly implant the receptor, four years ago. She assisted Reilly to do the same for him a year later.

A green light clicked above her head. Lawrence had engaged the project recorder. "LGN,

third layer," Lawrence said for the history books. "Pulses at a 55 lux ceiling. We've got three minutes."

Jaena looked through the surgery window at today's subject, a golden retriever, sedated. It moved in its sleep. "It's still in REM sleep," she reported. "I'm increasing anesthetic." Her hand reached a set of buttons. By touch, she commanded another 30 milliliters of the isoflurane, sevoflurane, and desflurane gaseous mix they used on dogs this size.

Jaena reached both her hands into the surgical interface, which was nothing more than gloves hooked into the machine. At the same time, two luminescent tools appeared inside of the surgical interface. Daniel Reilly, pioneer in the field of psychosurgery, was the one who first called these two points of light "hands." The term reminded Jaena that the tools were literal incarnations of the physical chunks of her body that bore the same name. Far removed from the days of simple representational holosolids, these two disks were of her being, existing inside the interface. Neither held form or color, and both were invisible to everyone but Jaena. She could 'feel' them as extended digits, as if her hands pushed through the interface and into the surgical area, despite the four feet of distance.

Jaena began testing each in turn; within the blink of perception, the hands turned flips, morphed into squares and lines, circles and pentagons. Octagons. This simple calibration procedure—the first five times she tried it—had caused her a migraine and a nosebleed on the fourth and fifth tries. Reilly threatened her ouster from the project. Instead, she snuck into the laboratory, and she practiced. And she practiced. Reilly had been furious, but when she became more adept than he on the interface, he relented.

Jaena stretched her neck once to the left, once to the right. Vertebrae popped with each move. Then she shaped her hands into her tools. The right hand turned into a thin line, like a half-foot long steel needle. This was the probe. The left hand morphed into a flat disk. This was the receptor.

"We're at 100% symbiosis," Lawrence informed her. She closed her eyes, so she could concentrate on where her hands would go, and she directed her right hand, the probe, into the contra-lateral half of the subject's left iris. That's where she left the probe for now. She pushed the left hand into the subject's right temporal lobe, and she moved quickly to its right LGN.

During the experiment, she would send flickers of light through her right hand. Those flickers would be received and recorded by her left hand. Various patterns would show various reactions, which Jaena would observe on through touch. To her, the data felt like vibrations across her fingertips. She read one scientist's description—one who had never worked this process. He described the moment like reading braille. She disagreed. She was not a blind person. This moment was like reaching out and touching the subject's soul.

The data would be shipped through the interface module and into her temporal lobe. The computer would then code the data into the computer's memory buffer. That data would then be shipped into the core memory, where it would be poked and prodded in a different way by the statistic dorks, Reilly chief among them. There had been talk, at the beginning of this work, that the data occurred through Jaena's perceptions, which she fed into the memory buffer herself. But analyses of the data were consistent with the stimuli, so no one asked too many questions. When Stockholm called, those questions stopped.

Jaena had performed this procedure hundreds of times. She knew that the difference in perception was the difference in the mechanisms collecting the data, not her feelings about the data. It was predictable; the lack of difference was almost boring. The best Jaena could hope with this dog … the acuity would be awful. The light sensitivity would be stellar. The movement

sensation would be perfect. Such was the vision of an evolutionarily designed hunter. Jaena knew these things. Everyone knew these things.

"We're starting with 33 lux," Jaena said.

"Thirty-three lux," Lawrence repeated. "That's high if our ceiling is 55."

"So maybe we're going to push a little here," Jaena responded. Lawrence said nothing, and she pulsed light through the right hand and into the subject's eye. Her left hand felt reaction tremors through the fingers of her left hand.

"Expected response," Jaena reported. "Thirty-three lux is creating excitation for 'on' areas, 'depression' for off areas."

"Let's move to forty-five," Lawrence suggested. Jaena shook her head.

"I'm jumping to 100 lux," she told her partner." Before Lawrence could respond, Jaena upped the amplitude. An explosion of colors hit her left receptor hand.

"That's too much data," Lawrence said. "The memory buffer is filling."

"I'm going to go up again," Jaena said.

"You're going to kill the subject."

"So? Let's see what happens," Jaena replied. "It's just a dog." Once again, Jaena upped the pulse, this time to 200 lux. A warning buzzer sounded behind her. The dog's heart had slowed. Oxygen meant for its brain stayed un-breathed in the surgical area. The dog was dying.

Then, like a butterfly flittering across her skin, Jaena felt something touch her right hand, the probe itself. She was the one who touched, not the other way around. She was not sure she liked the experience.

"What was that?" Jaena asked.

"What do you mean?" Lawrence asked in reply.

"Systems check," Jaena said.

Lawrence's voice intoned, almost as in ritual, "Interaction matrix, check. Control, check. Observation, check." That something moved again. That something brushed her sphere of being.

"Something's in here, Lawrence." She tried not to sound panicky. She almost succeeded.

"It's your imagination."

"The hell it is," Jaena yelled over her shoulder. Anger replaced fear. Curiosity coupled with anger and created a potent mix she could not resist. "Fine puppy," she whispered. "We do this the hard way." In her full voice, she said, "Lawrence, I'm going to find it, whatever it is. I'm going to make a feedback loop."

"No, you are not," Lawrence replied. "We have no idea what will happen, and we're in enough trouble as it is. The subject is almost dead, Jaena. You've already caused it severe brain damage."

"Either shut up and get to your board, or go away," Jaena replied. They had never tested this procedure. Reilly had always said he could not vouch for the safety of the subject or the experimenter. She shifted both hands from probe or receptor to probe and receptor, each ready to double its duty. Jaena attempted the switch three times before she was satisfied with the balance.

"We're over time," Lawrence told her. "Reilly's going to notice."

"Whatever," she replied. "If he notices, he notices." She pulsed the hands—each at 100 lux. The feedback crashed through her mind. It was like holding a microphone to a speaker, if that microphone was as big as a tree and the speaker was as big as the ocean.

Jaena felt the muscles of her neck and shoulders spasm, the pain flared from the base of her neck to between her shoulders. Still, Jaena received no sensation like she had before.

Whatever had touched her, it was hanging back.

"The subject has died," Lawrence told her. His voice was hard again, clinical and dead as the dog's still form. "I'm pulling you in fifteen seconds."

"Don't," Jaena warned.

"Ten seconds," he said. Jaena ground her teeth, but she complied. She tried to pull out, only to find she could not. The pressure she felt before had come back. It came back hard, and it pulled her deeper into that interstitial space between her world and its world. Whatever it was. She tried again to pull away, but still there was something—something—holding her hands.

"This isn't right," she whispered."I can't get out." Both her hands felt weak, asleep. Jaena began to panic, and she felt a new sensation on both her hands. Before, it felt as if a touch, soft as life, was brushing her skin. Now, it was as if a second pair of hands had reached through the dog's vacant mind to grab her own. The hands were warm; they were small like a child's. Jaena screamed. Her chest tightened. She blacked out.

The surgery was going so well. The girl had slipped and fallen. The smallest bone fragment, just a sliver, had sliced through Lay-lee's dura mater, through the meniges, and into the cerebral cortex. It was brain surgery, but it was as simple as it went. Jaena had pulled 34 different children from life-threatening medulla carcinomas with her scalpel, with her hands. She was going to save her baby girl.

But she had gotten mad about something, she couldn't remember what. Maybe it was something, someone—Lawrence?—had said.

She remembered now. He had said that she was not a specialist in this sort of wound, that the techniques were different. He had said that there were others more qualified. She ignored him, and she had entered surgery.

That thought had sped through her brain, and there was that one mistake. She didn't believe she had done it, but there it was, that smallest of cuts on a cortical arterial short vessel. Afterward, only minutes of frantic activity later, frantic, useless activity, Jaena had held her daughter's hand as the body cooled. She did not let go until Lawrence had pulled her away.

Jaena woke gasping for breath. She cried. Lawrence was scrubbing each of her hands in turn with the alcohol agent that was supposed to dissolve the interface gel. Instead, the gel felt hard, caked on, pulling the cells of her skin on her arms. The console warning sounds blared. She pushed Lawrence away.

"Take care of the interface," she said. She rolled to her side and vomited her lunch. Chicken fingers with heavy, yellow mustard seemed like a good idea at the time.

Lawrence held a hand on her shoulder and her hair from her face. "Take care of it," she repeated. He did so, and Jaena made her way to the sink. The once silvery interface gel was now charcoal black. She scrubbed with the available brush and then resorted to a Brillo steel wool soap pad she had left in the sink cabinet the last time she had cleaned. The interface gel—if she could call it that anymore—began to burn. She continued to scrub.

With most of the gel gone, Jaena pulled a towel and patted each arm, ignoring the spots of blood showing on the white cloth. She walked to the console, behind Lawrence, and she flipped the recorder from 'on' to 'off.' The intercom light flickered, and Reilly's voice filled the room, thunderous and bouncing to every corner, filling every space. "What are you *doing*, Jansen?"

Lawrence ran to the wall phone and pulled it off its receiver. "We're ok," he said. "There was some sort of malfunction, but we're ok." He listened to Reilly's voice over the

phone's receiver, and though Jaena could not understand the words, she caught the principal investigator's anger. "No, the interface is fine," Lawrence assured Reilly. Again a pause. "The subject died," he said. Three seconds later, Reilly hung up the phone. Lawrence did the same four seconds after that.

"Nice," Lawrence said. "Real nice."

"Something happened, Lawrence. Something I don't understand."

"That would be you destroying everything you touch, Jaena."

A console warning light flashed on command control. Then another. Lawrence moved to his chair, but he didn't touch anything. He watched the console. "This is wrong," he said after a few moments.

"What?" she asked. She repeated the question when he did not respond.

"The buffer," Lawrence said. "It didn't clear when the interface switched off. It's supposed to transfer the sensory data to the memory hard disks. Now it's full of data, but that data is not going anywhere." Lawrence tapped a few queries onto his keyboard. He shook his head. "Jaena, something is holding onto the buffer. It's stuck in the interface."

"Is it … is it something to do with the dog?" she asked. Ghost stories her grandmother had told to her floated through her mind. She had sudden memories of songs they had sung, of fingers stained from cigarettes.

Lawrence checked a few readings and tapped his fingers across the keyboard. "No," he said. "The buffer emptied your first readings, and this current data came while you were working, right when you started to kill the dog." For the first time in years, Jaena saw something close to interest in his eyes. "You know, you might have attracted something."

"From where?"

Lawrence shrugged. "From wherever the dog went, maybe."

"What do we do?"

"Suit up."

Jaena stiffened. "I'm not going back," she said. "I'm not."

"You screwed up once already today."

"Don't blame me, Lawrence. I'm sorry."

"Jesus, Jaena. None of that matters. Get in there and clean your mess."

Jaena looked at her hands. "I can't," she said.

"Fine," Lawrence replied. He moved to the interface gel canisters and covered his arms and hands to his elbows. He walked to the interface, and without hesitation, pressed his hands inside.

Lawrence closed his eyes and ran his calibrations. Jaena watched from a few feet away, unwilling to come closer to either the interface or to him. Not for the first time, Jaena resented him and his stubborn courage, his ability to do that thing she could not.

But then Lawrence's body stiffened; his knees bent as if he tried to cringe away from something. But after a moment, he stood again; his expression changed from shock to a simple joy. Jaena moved to the board, and she noticed that Lawrence had not turned the recorder to 'on.' Lawrence laughed. The sound came from somewhere deep inside of him. The sound had taken an effort to build, as if he were out of practice.

Jaena watched the command control. Lawrence's blood pressure dropped. His heart rate decelerated. The blissful smile on his face remained. "Lawrence, get out!" she yelled. He did not respond. His body slid against the interface, and then to the ground. His arms hung above his head, spread to either side. The position caused him to stop breathing.

Jaena rushed to the interface. She could try to pull him away physically, but that sudden separation could kill him as easily as his deep immersion. She plunged both hands inside, heedless of her lack of interface gel. A human warmth covered her. Jaena heard … singing? She wasn't supposed to *hear* anything. It was Lawrence.

I love you Lay-lee,
Oh yes I do…
I love you Lay-lee,
A love so true …
When you're not with me,
I'm blue …
Oh Lay-lee, I love you.

In the last refrain, a second voice joined the first. It was a whispered, half-spoken voice, the voice of a baby mimicking her father. The baby had the 'you' nailed like a pro, its open-vowel sound easy to form with a brand-new mouth. It was their child in the buffer. Lay-lee and Lawrence were together. Their souls pressed together in a soul-tied twist.

"Lawrence," she called. "You're dying."

"Jaena, it's her." His voice was a soft brush of silk, like the whisper of a dream "It's her."

From a long distance, Jaena heard a faint, enthusiastic "Mama! Mama!" She pushed the sound away.

"You're stuck in the buffer," she said.

"Let us go," Lawrence said. "I'm going with her."

"Lawrence, you can't do that." The child's voice stopped and there was silence, as if Lay-lee listened to this argument between her parents.

"Leave me here, Jaena, please," Lawrence pleaded. Jaena re-adjusted the buffer so that its back end opened. She wrapped her tool hands around everything she could find that was Lawrence. But she had found something more, in that interface between two worlds. She felt a soft, small, and wet breath on her hands. She smelled lavender. Jaena pulled with the strength she had left.

"Nooo, Daddy, no!" the little girl cried. Jaena placed herself between Lay-lee and Lawrence. Through the force of her will, she separated the embracing entities. It was as if she had pulled two pieces of interlacing wire from the other. Both parts came away bent.

"No!" Lawrence screamed. Jaena felt a rush of *something* through the buffer. The vacuum closed, and the buffer was empty except for the two of them. Lawrence pulled from the interface, and he slumped to the ground. Jaena remained to finalize the shut-down sequence, and then pulled out herself.

Lawrence's hands, still silvery from the interface gel, glistened and bled onto his pants. He clasped his knees and pulled them tight to his chest. Jaena pried one of his hands into her own. She pressed it to her chest, so he could feel her heartbeat. His hand felt dead and limp in her grip. "I wanted you to let me go," he whispered.

"You would have died."

"Who cares, Jaena? Who cares? I was holding her."

"That's not the way it should be," Jaena replied.

"Jaena, that was our child!"

"I need you too much," Jaena said. Lawrence pulled his hand away. Jaena reached for him,

but her hand snagged the chain that held the sapphire pendant. The chain snapped, and the pendant fell to the floor.

Lawrence stared at the pendant, and he seemed to see it for the first time. He could finally see it, and not just feel it. Jaena picked the pendant from the ground and smeared the jewelry with the interface gel.

She offered the pendant to Lawrence, but his face hardened at the edges. "I don't want it," he said, shaking his head. "I don't want any of this." Lawrence stood, and he left the room, leaving the door open behind him.

Jaena stared at the pendant, but then closed her hand over it in a fist and broke it into two pieces. The edges of the broken jewel cut her hand, and her blood mixed with the interface gel. She stood, crossed to the open door and closed it softly, so that the latch barely clicked. But it did click. Jaena dropped the pendant into the trash, she sat at command control, and she began to read over the experiment data.

The End

Chris Przybyszewski works as a grant proposal and technical writer in Memphis, Tennessee. "Soul-Tied Twist" marks his second Deep Magic appearance. He writes fantasy because of the freedom the genre allows the writer. He derived this story from the Greek myth of Heracles saving Theseus from Hades' "Chair of Oblivion."

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards

continued from page 18

We now traversed the slip face of a dune under a lead sky, the sun a sliver of polished brass on the horizon. Sand slithered around the legs of the horses, and they slid downward one step for every two upward. At last we gained the top, where Morgan turned sharply to her right. We crossed a glaring salt pan, headed for a rock face rising out of the earth, towering so that it seemed to support the sky. As we neared it, I spied a dark fault breaking the continuity of the formation. Morgan aimed straight for it. A pair of gargoyles atop twin pillars of marble guarded the entrance. They sat cold and lifeless, wings spread, stone eyes raking the sand for infidels. Morgan led us into the fissure.

The sides were tall and sheer and, as we went forward, they narrowed until I could reach out my hands and touch either side. The rock was polished obsidian. The only light came from an unseen sun reflecting from the black surfaces. We continued forward for about a quarter of a mile. Then the chasm juked to the left around a cluster of boulders.

Morgan squeezed past. I followed and we entered an iridescent rain forest. The scaled bark of the massive trees glittered like fractured Christmas ornaments. Boles stretched hundreds of feet above us, blossoming into a leaf-textured sky of a thousand colors. The sun shone as a sapphire crescent just below the prismatic canopy.

In a manner of minutes I was sweltering. Sweat beaded my forehead and ran in rills down my face. I took my cloak off, deciding not to place it in the panniers but lay it across the pommel for easy access in case the weather changed again.

I could not help but feel like I was trapped on a carousel, and every revolution took me by a new fantastic landscape, twisting and raveling like an animated Salvadore Dali painting. I did not think to be anxious, though. I believe now that the swift metamorphosis of the scenery, like a world in constant genesis, had a numbing effect on my mind. Unable to interpret such bizarrely shifting realities, the only way I thought to survive the unpredictability was to fix my gaze resolutely on Morgan's back and follow her precisely.

Meanwhile, she remained stiff and uncommunicative, as if survival meant insulating herself against all distraction.

The forest lasted but a moment. Then we splashed through a driving rainstorm on an interstate highway. Gigantic earth moving machines, advancing and retreating in veiled shadows, plowed muddy furrows in the ground beside us. Overhead, planes without any wings roared thunderously through a fluorescent night sky. A machine appeared suddenly out of the heavy downpour and rolled across the road in front of us, grinding up mud and concrete. Morgan swerved behind it and I followed.

On the other side of the machine, the road let out onto another rocky plain, this time studded with withered mesquite trees. The diffuse lighting seemed to originate as much from the ground as overhead. Two black specks circled in the sky. Buzzards, I supposed. They stayed with us while we traveled quite a distance across this barren land. I should have been grateful for the stability, but the whole time my back felt like a target for those specks and I wondered if they would feast on our flesh.

We neared an uplift where slabs of stone had been tossed about like a child's blocks and mesquite trees scattered through them like jack straws. Morgan's mount lurched sideways into a lee of rock and wood beside the trail.

"Hide yourself!" she yelled and vaulted from the saddle. She rolled against a clump of scrub trees, covering herself with her cloak until she looked like a mound of dirt.

I followed her example.

A pair of shadows passed overhead. Phobos hid amid a cluster of small boulders and stood

very still. Whinnying, Deimos skittered onto the trail. I made to rise and go after him.

Morgan hissed, "Stay where you are!"

The tone in her voice was terrified. I regained my hiding place.

Deimos lifted his front hooves nervously. His sides heaved and he neighed wildly. Then, through an opening in my cloak, I saw a pterosaur turn on a wing and swoop for Deimos. Close behind the first, another followed. The stallion bolted. He veered out of the path of the first one, but the second one struck, talons digging deeply into horse flesh. Deimos screamed and bucked but could not tear himself free. The first one circled quickly and he struck too at the neck. A razor sharp claw pierced Deimos's skull and he died instantly. The two flying reptiles carried the animal away. Within seconds the sky was clear again.

It occurred to me that the most likely explanation for what I witnessed was that someone had laced my pipe tobacco with a powerful hallucinogen like LSD and that none of this was actually happening. I had never left Macbeth's study in Thereon and remained sitting beside the fire, staring vacantly into the flames, imagining all of this. But I don't think that I would have been capable of making such a judgment in the moment had I been drugged.

Morgan stood calmly and went over to Phobos. She mounted him quickly and said, "Come on. They should let us alone until we leave this place."

I climbed behind her and we went on.

Soon clumps of trees, larger cousins to Japanese Bonsai, limbs twisted as if by demented gardeners, ran away to either side of us. A pale green sun rode a line of hills to our left. The hills rolled like a giant flexing his muscles. They quickly melted away and formed a blood-red mesa that surged toward us and under us like giant swells and on to the other side of the horizon. The sun radiated shards of stark orange light into a metallic sky. The mesa contracted and my heart beat anxiously as it shriveled to a thin ribbon of rock on stony pillars high above a chasm of molten brass. One slip and we would be incinerated.

Noxious vapors rose from the boiling mass and I drew my cloak over my nose and mouth to ward off the fumes.

Morgan sat stiffly in front of me, her cowl still shrouding her face. She had not touched her cloak since entering the arch. She rode quietly except for an occasional wheezing sob from the dank air. I feared saying anything to her in case I disturbed her concentration and we plummeted into the inferno.

The bridge widened and turned into a trail that switchbacked down a cliff face. A bright calm sea lay below us, its sable waters lapping harmlessly onto a beach the color of a spring sky and flecked by the shimmering opalescence of sea shells. Entranced by the idyllic scene, I momentarily forgot about our surreal journey. I wanted to rest, to take in the coconut palms and sand, to revel in the soft scent of sandalwood that perfumed the air. But Morgan whipped Phobos into a dangerous canter on the narrow trail. I opened my mouth to protest and stopped, aghast. As I watched, the sea receded violently and rapidly from the shore. Glimmers of silver, violet, orange and green flashed in the sunlight as fish flopped and spun atop waterless coral and bright blue sand. Out on the horizon, a wave reared as high as the cliff we descended. The tsunami hurtled toward land with a deafening roar. A dull green mist preceded it by at least two hundred yards. Fine droplets of water spattered my face and I could see no way we could avoid being smashed against the cliff.

Then the trail turned abruptly away from the sea into blackness. I heard the crashing roar of the wave and smelled its salt spray like phantoms of sound and scent. It was as if we had turned at right angles to the reality of the tidal wave and all that remained of it were shadows.

The darkness receded under pale phosphorescence, glowing in thin striations alongside us. By its light, I saw that we had entered a long, sloping tunnel. Glowing stalactites soon replaced the phosphorescence and marked our trail every fifty feet or so.

At last we hit bottom, literally and metaphorically. An adit appeared ahead of us, and when we exited the tunnel, we entered a dense forest. A silver sun lowered slowly in a green sky, its departing light lengthening the trees' shadows into eldritch shapes. Twice large beasts bellowed and thrashed unseen beside us. Each time, Morgan became fiercely rigid until the noises waned in the gloom. This place was not entirely stable, for the woods changed shape around us as we moved through them, becoming jungle, then boreal forest, then eastern oak and southern pine and back to jungle. But I was relieved because, for what seemed like several turns of the merry-go-round, everything stayed within similar biomes at least.

At last we came to a clearing with an entrance marked by two trees crossed in an 'X' pattern. Morgan guided Phobos under the wooden cross. As soon as we entered, she relaxed so completely, she nearly fell from the saddle. I barely caught her and eased her to the ground.

She immediately curled into a ball and shook in silent little sobs.

I tried to examine her but she shook me off.

"I'll be all right," Morgan said, her breath rapid and sounding like a frog's croak. "Just give me a few moments."

Since she refused my help, I tended to Phobos. I led him beside a small stream that ran along the back of the clearing. His withers shook with every breath; his ears lay flat against his head and a stark wildness haunted his eyes. I removed the saddle and panniers and rubbed him down, all the while humming a simple melody until he relaxed and the tightness eased from his muscles. In one of the saddle bags I found a curry comb and brushed him from head to tail. When I finished, I gave him oats and a carrot from supplies in the other bag. Then I hobbled him and let him eat whatever grass he could find.

Night, or what passed for it, had tiptoed upon us by the time I finished. I watched the sky darken. It wasn't so much night as the absence of day. Light became a gray filtered gloom that transformed the trees into feathered shadows.

I turned toward Morgan, wondering if she had recovered from her ordeal yet. It seemed to me that she had taken the brunt of the wheeling transitions we had encountered, applying her will to the wild and turbulent landscapes we passed through in order to make certain we did not plunge off the trail to our deaths. She surprised me by dragging several large tree limbs into the clearing. She heaved them onto a mound of firewood and brush she had already collected.

"Hurry," she said. "Light a fire. Make it huge. Set the tips of these limbs on the flames. We'll keep them burning throughout the night."

"In case we're attacked by wild beasts," I joked.

"For the beasts we can trust your sword and your strength. We'll need these for the shadow wraiths."

She left the deadfall and rushed back into the forest without any further clarification.

A frantic energy colored her movements, so I didn't question her orders. Most likely she thought Lord Qweg understood the situation. Maybe I would have, if I had all my memories. I soon had a respectable blaze going. Morgan had not yet returned and I worried something had happened to her, when I heard sounds behind me. My sword cleared its sheath as I turned.

Morgan hauled a giant limb, larger than a twelve year old girl should have hoped to move by herself, and yet she carried it without any trouble. She didn't seem to think it anything extraordinary so I didn't remark on it.

"I'm glad to see that our passage through the Umbra hasn't dulled your senses," she said, as she dropped her burden beside the fire. "There are more like this one just beyond the clearing." She pointed to a break in the woods.

I went into it and found two massive limbs like the one she had wrestled. I dragged them easily into the glade.

She had placed a large portion of the dead fall onto my fire and had created a blazing inferno. The flames rose at least ten feet above our heads and embers pierced the gloom far above their tips. The limb she had retrieved had one end stuck into the fire. I hastily added my two near hers and retreated to the relative coolness of the air twenty feet away.

Meanwhile, she retrieved Phobos from the stream and moved him close to us and the fire.

Next she reached into her cloak and pulled out a metal sphere studded with jewels. She pressed three of the gems and all of them lit up, pulsating like a pinball machine. A low whine filled the area, growing in pitch until it went beyond the range of my hearing. She threw it into the air and it whirled high above the fire without descending.

She breathed out a sigh of relief. "At least we'll know if something sneaks up on us," she said.

She went over to the pannier with the horses' feed and pulled out a couple of apples.

At this point I knew I could no longer keep my amnesia a secret. The realization did not stem from some kind of kindred spirit with Morgan. True, we were facing the same dangers, and she had thrown in with me to the extent that she had warned me of Macbeth's doublecross. No, the situation required candor between us. If we were going to survive this hellish place, she had to know that I understood none of it and she would have to explain what was expected of me.

"I have something to confess," I said.

"Too bad about Deimos," she said, as though she hadn't heard me. "He had all of our food. We'll have to share rations with Phobos."

She tossed one of the red fruits at me. Undoing the clasp holding her cloak, she let it fall on the ground, close by to the fire, and settled herself on it. She shook her head so her long, red hair fell neatly on either side of her face. She smiled at me and patted the place beside her.

I assumed her nonchalance and squatted beside her. It was warm this near to the fire but not uncomfortably hot.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"It's a warding zone, a way station where we can rest," she answered around a bite of apple. "Here the landscape can't change." She gestured at the crossed logs. "That sign marks its boundaries within the Umbra."

I shook my head helplessly.

"The shadowlands," she added delicately.

When I still didn't say anything, she remained silent for a few moments. Then, "You don't remember any of this, do you? That's what you're going to confess."

I nodded. "In fact, I only learned my name is Lord Qweg yesterday. Or at least that's what Macbeth thinks it is because of this." I pointed to my tattoo.

Morgan laughed like the young girl who had come to my room this morning. But nothing of that young girl showed in her manner.

"You're Lord Qweg, all right."

"How can you be so sure?"

She pulled back her red hair and revealed a crescent tattoo like my own beside her right eye. It pulsed with a silver blue light.

"I'm your niece."

Chapter Five

I'm sure I looked appropriately dumbfounded, for she laughed lightly. She took another bite of her apple and dabbed the sleeve of her riding dress at the juice that dribbled down her chin. And it struck me. I saw the family resemblance in the eyes, mostly. They were the reason she seemed so familiar the night she rescued me.

I resisted the urge to reach over and hug her, for too much ambiguity surrounded all that happened since I awoke on the beach in Thereon. Maybe the escape and the passage into the Umbra were part of someone's plan within a larger plan to use me. Besides, when had family been a guarantee of safety, my cynical self told me.

Instead, I asked her, "How much can you tell me about myself?"

"All I know is who you are and some items out of your past that are common family knowledge. I don't know if it will do much good."

"It'll be a start. Anything might help."

"You have a brother, Merlin Skye"—The name on the paper!—"my father." She said the last so bitterly that the name must have tasted like ashes in her mouth.

"You and Merlin are master Shadow Weavers. He created Thereon and other Tapestry Worlds on a device called a Shadowloom. You made Enion, where you've lived for several years, I think. Dad once told me that contact between family members is pretty intermittent. I never saw you before last night."

"Do you know how I lost my memory?"

"No. But chances are Merlin had something to do with it. A couple of years ago he became resentful of you. He never said why, but he forbade us to mention your name at Tintagel."

"Tintagel?"

"The castle where we lived in London on another Tapestry World called Earth."

The names caused vague cold stirrings along my spine. They seemed somehow connected to the clothes I was wearing, when I awoke on the shore, and to the bewildering images and strange words that came into my head from time to time. But they prompted no recollections at present and I filed them away with the others for the future.

"Do you know how I ended up in Thereon?"

She hesitated.

"What?" I demanded harshly. I suppose I should have been nicer, Morgan being my niece and my only ticket out of here, but I had a life denied to me and I wanted it back.

Her chin started trembling.

"I need to know everything," I said, forcing my voice to calm down.

She bit her lip and composed herself.

"I recognized you last night from your picture and the stories Merlin told us about you before the two of you split. But I kept it to myself. I hoped I could use you somehow to get myself free from Thereon. But Macbeth recognized you too. He acted before I had a chance to tell you about myself or plan anything with you."

"Is he also related to Merlin?"

"No. He rules in Thereon for Merlin. He has schemes of his own, and probably thought he could use you to gain more power. Whatever his plans, they would not have included me, and so I warned you."

"How did Macbeth learn about me and Enion?"

"I don't think last night was your first time in Thereon. From what little Macbeth told me, you visited now and then with Merlin in better days."

Her explanation made sense. I didn't sense any particular affinity for Thereon, and if I had visited seldomly, maybe it never made any lasting impression on me.

"Why didn't you tell me all of this earlier?"

"At first I didn't know about your amnesia. You acted peculiarly, believing Enion and Thereon were part of the same world, but I thought you did so for your own reasons. It wasn't until we approached the gate, when I expected you to take the lead and you acted skeptical, that I figured something must be wrong. The only plausible explanation was that you had lost your memory."

"I could have been an impostor with a fake tattoo."

"Then you would have died instantly when you stepped through the arch. Only a person with shadowlands' blood can survive entry through the gates."

I took a bite of my apple and chewed it slowly to give myself time to digest all she had told me thus far. I felt relief, mostly, knowing a bit more about myself. Morgan's story gave a context to the crescent tattoo and my tattered recollections of Enion. It helped account for the dream images, anomalous words and cryptic references to strange objects floating in my mind that seemed centuries distant from the medieval world of Thereon. Most likely they originated from other Tapestry Worlds I had visited. I also felt a little more at ease with Morgan . . . as much as the suspicious part of me allowed. Had she been ready with a glib explanation as to my surprising appearance in Thereon, I would have figured her to have participated in my difficulties. But she had acted to take advantage of my arrival. I would have done the same had our positions been reversed. Still, the coincidence of her being in Thereon in the first place remained.

"How did you become a slave?"

"When Merlin banned your name, he began making noises about getting rid of some of the Tapestry Worlds. He said they'd outlasted their allure and he'd get rid of all but a few and make new ones. When I was very little, I saw him burn weavings, but I didn't understand the significance. As I grew older, I knew what destroying a tapestry meant. I didn't want him to hurt all those people. So I mentioned you. He'd told us so many stories about your bravery in defending Enion. I said that I'd go get you to save these worlds, too. And . . ."

Her hand fluttered to her mouth, which formed a soundless 'oh'. Her body seemed to shrink and she looked like a little girl again, this time like one who worried she has done something wrong.

"I'm . . . I mean . . . Do you suppose I'm the one responsible for everything that has happened to you?" she blurted.

I frowned.

"I have no memories of my brother, so I couldn't say. But if what you're saying is accurate . . ."

"It is! It is!"

" . . . then it sounds as good an explanation as any. He could have been the one who left me on that beach to be taken by the slavers."

Tears brimmed her eyes and she dropped her head. "I'm terribly sorry. I caused all of this."

I lifted her chin until she was looking at me.

"You couldn't know," I said, meaning it. "And even had you been able to guess something like this, ultimately Merlin would have done whatever he did simply because he chose to. No one forced him to act the way he did."

I offered a few more platitudes and they seemed to help, even for an adolescent with old eyes and the sense of injustice that being a slave generates.

I held a silence for a long while, during which I finished the apple and laid the core beside me. I pulled out my pipe and filled the bowl with ganja. Soon the sweet tangy smell filled the air. I liked what it did to me, clearing my head and heightening my senses.

So my brother had left me in Thereon. At least Morgan's tale pointed to him as the culprit. That left the mystery of the burning wreck and some samaritan pulling me to safety. It did not sound like the work of a brother who wanted to see me dead. But maybe witnesses had forestalled him, or he wanted me to suffer. I could understand the latter. If I ever found my way out of this place and a means to reverse our positions, I would make Merlin despair an eternity for what he was putting me through now.

"What happened next?" I asked.

"Merlin took me to Thereon, had me branded and watched me being sold on the auction blocks. Everything else I told you is true. I escaped and Macbeth found me. I don't believe he knew who I was, or if he did, he liked the idea of thwarting Merlin. Or perhaps he saved me to use against him. Whatever his reasons, Macbeth gave me freedom in exchange for . . . the future with him."

I gestured to the Umbra.

"You knew about this place. Why didn't you run away to a different world?"

"The Umbra is no place for a child alone."

I had to agree to that. After our *day's* adventures, I reckoned that with a company of Army Rangers we just might get out of here alive.

By now she had finished her apple. I stood and gave the cores to Phobos. At the same time I retrieved my cloak. The fire had burned down during her explanations and I added more wood. Soon the flames flickered high above our heads against the lightless sky. Tongues of mist licked about the edges of the clearing, and I had the feeling that colossal things moved quietly in the shadows. However, Morgan's alarm remained silent, so I relaxed somewhat.

I laid my cloak beside hers and sat down again. I blew smoke rings for a couple of breaths.

"Will that gadget of yours really protect us?"

"It won't stop anything, if that's what you mean, but it will warn us if a creature approaches this warding zone. That will give us time to defend ourselves."

"Why do you call it a warding zone?"

She shrugged.

"It's just the name. They're scattered throughout the realities like oases or church sanctuaries. They contrive a tiny place of stability within the Umbra and shield us from the chaos that reigns all around. An "X" sign always marks them."

"I still can't comprehend what the Umbra really is."

Her brow furrowed and she was silent for a moment.

"Think of it as a place where matter and anti-matter co-exist. In normal space, that would cause a giant explosion, destroy everything. But here in the Umbra the result is chaos. Beauty and blight, order and anarchy, positive and negative mixed together randomly without any need

for rules or . . .”

“I don’t know for certain, but I don’t believe anything like this exists in Enion,” I interrupted.

“Of course not. Enion, like all Tapestries, is a world where life exists with order. The Umbra is chaos, the disordered state, surrounding all Tapestry Worlds.”

“How do you navigate through it?”

“It isn’t like sailing, where you pick a point of latitude and longitude and cross the ocean to another place. Here, you keep your goal firmly locked in your mind. Eventually, the Umbra leads you there.”

I thought about this and a deep grumbling stirred within me. Morgan’s explanation implied magic. I resented the idea that my life could be thrust forth and back at the whim of supernatural forces. I wanted to fight and claw my way through, to win by the sweat of my brow, pull myself up by my own bootstraps and whatever other hackneyed sayings gave magnitude to my own self and will.

“Can you change the surroundings until they match the image in your head?”

“You’re thinking linearly. You can’t impose your will on the Umbra or it will destroy you. You have to blend with whatever it throws at you. Eventually it will take you to your destination.”

“How long can that take?”

She shrugged.

“A day . . . a month . . . a year, perhaps. Time doesn’t flow in the Umbra the way it does in the worlds outside. A day in here can be a week out there.” She must have seen the impatience on my face, because she added, “You can speed up the changes, as long as it isn’t done steadily or with some kind of pattern. Of course, that brings on its own kind of dangers. The chaos becomes more violent.”

“The tsunami,” I said, picturing the giant wave that nearly crushed us.

“Precisely. I was trying to hurry us away from the dinosaurs. I didn’t want to encounter a pack of raptors or a herd of stampeding hadrasaurs. Besides, I was getting tired and I wanted to find a place of relative calm to rest.”

“Is there any way to control the Umbra at all?”

“The only way to manipulate the shadowlands is with the Shadowloom and the Ixtlan Shuttle. Supposedly, the Shuttle can take you from one tapestry world to another without having to go through the Umbra.”

I barely kept my body from jerking in surprise. The puzzling message on the scrap of paper in my boot had taken on a new dimension. It didn’t refer to some vehicle, but the instrument used by weavers in a loom for shooting the threads of the weft from one side of the warp to the other. The sentence fragment ‘. . . Shuttle vanished; I must find it,’ and the signature, Merlin Skye, suggested that my brother no longer controlled the Ixtlan Shuttle.

I wondered if my niece knew its whereabouts.

“And Merlin has those, I suppose?” I asked, keeping my voice steady.

“Yes. He guards them at Tintagel.”

“How does shadow weaving work?” I asked, oddly pleased that she knew nothing of the Shuttle’s disappearance.

She shook her head. “I don’t know, not for sure anyway. I only saw him at it once, before he bore me through the weaving into Thereon. He had tied me up and I could do nothing but watch. He sat at his loom and wove filaments as fine as moonlight into the tapestry, threading

the Shuttle from one side of the loom to the other. A new picture slowly appeared as he worked. When he finished, I saw myself on Thereon's slave blocks. Then he spoke to me for the last time. 'This is where you will live the rest of your very long life as a slave.'"

The green flecks in her eyes flashed angrily and her voice nearly broke.

"You know the rest."

I felt sorry for her—the branding, the slavery, even pumping information from her. But that feeling lasted only a moment. I had just declared war on my brother and I would use Morgan and anyone else to destroy him. Wouldn't I? I didn't let myself explore this idea too deeply. I intended to win this battle, and I couldn't afford sympathy for anyone.

My mind churned with ideas. I pulled the ganja smoke deep into my lungs, as much to give me something to do as to use its effects to concentrate my thinking.

The idea of finding the Shuttle was very alluring; but I had no idea where to look for it nor what to do with it once I had it. However, a surprise attack on Merlin appealed to my sense of audacity. If I could destroy him, his threats to my life would be ended, and I could search for the Shuttle at my leisure.

However, the means of my freedom lay on a world I remembered nothing about, in a city I had never heard of, in the home of my greatest enemy. The move was a gamble; but *toujours l'audace*, I told myself.

"We should change our plans and go to Earth," I said.

Morgan started to laugh. As I watched, confounded by her reaction, her laughter grew more intense. I thought the events of the day had caught up with her and she was becoming hysterical. Then I realized that she was laughing at me.

I leveled my voice and said with absolute dead calm, "This isn't funny. We need to stamp out the head of this snake if we are ever to be truly free."

My words stopped her and she became serious. She stared at me bleakly.

"No it isn't funny. If we went to Earth now, and provided we arrived without the Umbra killing us first, Merlin would have us arrested the moment we approached Tintagel."

"Surely you know a way to get us past his defenses."

Her cheerless expression did not change.

"Maybe we could get inside, and if you were a hundred percent, your amnesia cured, we might even be able to reach his quarters. But that is as close as we would ever get to him."

I started to protest and she cut me off.

"You cannot conceive of the power that he has, nor the forces he can bring to bear upon us in his world. If he didn't kill us outright, he would torture us until we wished ourselves dead. Your only choice, our only choice, is to find a way to restore your mind completely. After that, you can gather enough support to attack him on Earth."

I recognized in the finality of her tone the same stubbornness as myself—no doubt a family trait.

"Perhaps you're right," I said at last. "We need rest. Tomorrow we'll continue on to Enion."

"As you wish," Morgan said, though she did not sound all that enthusiastic about it.

I would have questioned her about her reluctance, but by now my pipe had gone out and I still had some sorting out to do before I slept. I would ask her about it in the morning. I cleaned the bowl and put it away in my shirt.

Morgan made a pillow of her arm and was snoring softly by the time I finished.

I rolled up in my cloak and gazed into a night sky I could not recall seeing before. I identified no patterns of stars or even individual points of light. Nor did a uniform blackness or

brightness color it. Instead, light and dark bounded and pranced across the heavens intertwined in a wild tarantella. They flirted with one another, kissing and embracing, slapping and biting; they tickled and savaged . . . broke apart then rushed together, married and whorled like cream thrown into an ink well . . . then immediately they fractionated, black alongside white . . . distorted . . . swirled together again violently and were splashed across the sky's Promethean canvas. The fabric ignited suddenly and emblazoned the entire heavens in tornadoes of rainbow fire. And then the whole process began anew, only different this time except for the same frenzied movement and explosion of color.

The ganja probably affected me more than I thought, and for a while I became lost in the chaos. The wheeling topsy-turviness stimulated my thinking, and an understanding of the Umbra hovered at the edges of my consciousness. However, when I reached for the insight, it slid away into shadows. I played cat and mouse with it for a while and at last gave up.

I settled into watching the sparks from the fire soar upward, lazy tracers seeking invisible targets. Their arcs and tumbles were soothing, and after the events of the last twenty-four hours, a pleasant diversion. Then I noticed Morgan's alarm reflecting the fire's glare. The gems sparkled like hundreds of tiny mirrors. My ease vanished. I reckoned she must have been planning this escape for some time—from before the moment her father exiled her on Thereon—and she had managed to smuggle the device into that world. Such farsightedness wasn't likely in any twelve year old girl I could think of, and this filled me with unease.

With that thought, the spell brought on by the ganja and the turbulent night sky evaporated. With a sigh I settled down to review and plan. I pulled all the information I had learned from the mental compartments I had stuffed them into.

Morgan's tale: the facts fell together well enough into a coherent story. I supposed they were true as far as she let on, but I couldn't help thinking that she'd been smart enough to manipulate me at our first encounter and most likely continued doing the same now. I tried to imagine what she had to gain by not revealing everything. Probably the same things that would not allow me to divulge the Ixtlan Shuttle's disappearance. She looked for an edge while seeking vengeance upon her father. I could sympathize with that thinking. I planned to do the same myself. The fact that I had given her my pledge of protection weighed somewhat on me. I figured it wouldn't hurt me to let her follow her own schemes, as long as they did not interfere with mine. If she got in the way of my revenge, however, I would do whatever it took to stop her. The cynical part of myself explained that when building a house you sometimes bend a few nails and throw them away.

Next: the matter of how I came to possess a scrap of paper in my brother's handwriting. It suggested that somehow I had recently visited Tintagel on Earth. Perhaps, I had entered Merlin's study, looking for something, and I tore this note from his journal. Merlin came in unexpectedly and we fought or I simply fled, was caught, nearly killed, rescued momentarily, recaptured. Take your pick from a dozen scenarios, I thought. They all led to the same place—exile in Thereon's slave world. But now I had my freedom and most likely Merlin did not know about it—yet. Macbeth wouldn't tell his master that he had allowed a hated enemy to disappear. So I had some time to plan and seek revenge before Merlin discovered I had escaped.

Last: Morgan was right—going to Earth was out of the question. I doubt that I could have coerced her to take me anyway, and trying would only alienate her. We would return to Enion. With luck my amnesia would end, and I could use that world to attack Merlin's Earth. Meanwhile, I would search for the Shuttle because Merlin was undoubtedly doing the same. If I found it before he or any of his children, I would control the Tapestry Worlds as the new Shadow

Weaver.

I laughed fiercely at this and allowed the violence, which I now controlled unrelentingly because it was in my best interest to be disciplined about it, to surface a little and work its way into my body. It was a pleasant feeling, filling my muscles with the tinglings of fury. I thought of the berserkers, who on the battlefield let all reason fly until nothing remained alive around them, even at times their own comrades. I let this feeling continue a while before I carefully put this temperament back in its compartment and fell asleep.

Chapter Six

Once more the slender spire rose high into the dirty sky. At its top perched the Black Castle. This time, as I dreamed*, I stood looking out from one of the towers. Its scalloped stone, shiny like a vulture's feathers, seemed to reflect the city's forbidding, dark ugliness. The air smelled of burnt fuel and made my eyes water. My stomach revolted at the noisome fumes, but even as the ugliness repelled me, a longing to be here rose up within me.*

I turned and walked down a flight of steps into the courtyard, crossed grass and flagstones and entered the castle's main hall. A beamed and frescoed ceiling rose fifty feet above my head, and an enormous chandelier, depended from chains, held a hundred flickering candles illuminating the entryway. I crossed the marble flooring, gleaming with polish, and headed down a drab corridor until I reached a massive oak door, bound with brass and supported with wrought iron hinges. A brass lock held it closed. Taking a thin, flat key from a thong around my neck, I fitted it into the lock and turned back the tumblers. I went through the door and descended a winding stair, dimly lit by lanterns every fifty feet or so. At last I reached a darkened narrow corridor. Far ahead a glow pierced the shadows. I hurried forward. At the light I found another stair, this one straight, narrow and much shorter, which landed in an immense hall.

The source of the light blazed from a gigantic hearth casting a flickering orange-red glare into the room. The rest of the room was mostly shadows and dim light, save for in the room's center, where a massive loom towered.

I was drawn instantly to the loom, a fantastic piece of machinery like none other I had ever seen or read about. The warp ran vertically, the heddles vanishing in shadows above timbers that braced the vaulted ceiling. Nor could I be certain from my vantage point that the loom actually stopped at all. Looking upward along the polished wooden frame and strands of yarn, I stared into an infinite blackness like that of space, the top brace indiscernible.

The weft spanned two tall men; the slender comb at the loom's base was fashioned from polished bone, the color of ivory, and held hundreds of needle-thin teeth, as though used for dressing a faerie queen's hair; and the tensioning wheel glimmered in the fluttering firelight from its gold inlay and diamond cogs. Unused thread—disembodied gauzy filaments like the moonlight that filtered through two huge jewel-pane windows in the wall opposite the hearth—dangled from a rack of spindles near by. On a tray beneath the loom rested the Ixtlan Shuttle. Silver and shaped like a shoe tree, one end was softly rounded; the other was wafer thin and smooth so that it slipped easily between the strands of the weaving.

A tapestry of exquisite beauty hung on the loom, and I recognized the quilted skies, the menacing profile of Tirach Mir, the ominous shadows of Mistelwood and the grand palace. Below

the palace, the land sloped away through a city of wood and stone, ending in magenta sands on jade seas. Sun-bronzed men unloaded great bales and boxes from caravels at stone wharves. Overhead, seagulls circled the waiting ships. Landward, taverns and sea chandleries fronted cobblestone streets thronged by dock workers and seamen wearing homespun, muslin shirts and breeches. Other men, in fine suits and ruffled shirts, sat at desks issuing orders and scanning bills of lading. A very few individuals, more richly attired, like Lords in brocaded cloaks tied at the neck and open to the sea air, rode horses or were driven in carriages with ladies.

The startling detail in this arras blushed with a luminescence like a painting come to life. It hung on the loom, not as some flawed copy done by Graymalkin, but as the true Enion . . . my Enion.

I approached the tapestry slowly, never taking my eyes from the castle, especially the west tower where a beautiful woman stood, gazing out of the tapestry as though she could see me. I recognized her—Adella. Beside her towered the gigantic Peer. Behind them waited a young woman with the same jeweled hair and a misshapen dwarf. I reached out and touched Adella's fingers . . .

A loud siren ripped the images of Enion and Adella from my brain and catapulted me onto my feet, sword in hand.

I was still in the Umbra. The fire had burned down to spurts of flames and glowing embers. Beyond, the night fog gathered at the edges of the warding zone. A coldness slid down my spine as I watched two tendrils of glowing mist slip out of the shadows and into the clearing. Swiftly, the vapors coalesced and assumed the dusky shapes of a wolf and grizzly bear.

I didn't need Morgan to tell me these were shadow wraiths. They stared at me with pupils contracted to small slits against the brightness of the fire.

By now the siren had ended.

"Morgan, we have visitors!" I shouted into the stillness.

No reply!

I flicked a glance at her cloak, but it lay empty on the ground. The coldness slid into my testicles, and then anger surged through me at her betrayal. She had left me to be destroyed by these phantoms while she saved herself.

I heard Phobos's frightened whinny. He skittered sideways into my peripheral vision, but his hobbles prevented him from making an escape.

At least she hadn't taken the horse, I thought hopefully. But quickly I realized I had no time to saddle it and ride out of here.

The wolf turned its wispy muzzle toward the grizzly bear.

"Human," it whispered in a silky snarl.

The other nodded and sniffed the air.

"There were two, but now I smell only the horse and this man," the bear replied in a puzzled voice.

"No matter," the wolf growled. "One of us will take over the horse and carry the other in the man's body to the gathering in Enion."

They split up and circled the fire; the grizzly focused on me while the wolf glided toward Phobos.

I didn't wait and leapt over the fire, swinging my sword against the bear's spine as I landed. The blade passed through without any effect.

The bear reared and swung at my side with its left paw. I backpedaled furiously and it missed. Then a wreath of smoke spun out of a claw and became a taloned fist, grazing my thigh.

I cried out as my leg went numb. I looked down. My clothing was ripped; I saw no blood, just a luminosity where the claws had scratched my skin. I lurched backward, hobbling on my other leg; the bear lumbered after me. Fortunately, it moved in eddies with the breeze and I was able to stay beyond its reach.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the wolf launch itself upon Phobos's back. The horse reared but could not move to avoid the attack. Then, from beside the fire, a burning tree branch hurtled at the wraith and pierced its misty flesh. Sparks poured out of it like a roman candle. It howled in agony. Tentacles of smoke sprouted from its shoulders and grabbed the fiery spear.

The shadow wraith cried out, "I am deaded!" It burst apart in a thousand dying sparks.

Morgan appeared beside the fire. Flames danced against her pale skin and her dark red hair fluttered in the heat. Her face twisted in pleasure as she pumped her fist exultantly.

The wind changed direction and the bear bore down on me. I cut the air with my sword between us with no effect.

Morgan screamed, "Your sword is useless!"

She threw a burning brand at the bear. The wraith changed form into a giant ring of smoke and the torch passed through without harming it.

It resumed its bear shape and charged me.

But Morgan's attack gave me time to limp to the fire. I grabbed one of the flaming branches and swung it as the wraith fell on me. Like a cutlass, the firebrand sheared through the bear's neck. A fountain of sparks engulfed me. Frantically I brushed them from my hair and clothing. Morgan beat at them with her bare hands.

By the time the embers were all cold, only a fetid odor remained of the shadow wraiths.

I stared at Morgan. "Thanks," I rasped.

She smiled a wan welcome.

"I thought you had bugged out," I added.

"I was adding more deadfall to the fire when the siren sounded. I hid in the brush pile, where the wood and heat masked my scent, and waited to see what was attacking us."

"A good thing you did too."

Sensation began to return to my leg. I stamped the ground, hoping to speed up circulation.

Morgan turned away and retched for several seconds. I went to her side. She was trembling. I carried her to the cloaks and covered her with them. I fetched water from the stream. She choked a little but managed to swallow a mouthful. She pushed the cup away and gasped, "I'll be all right."

The shaking stopped.

After a few moments she said, "Farding, that was close. We were almost taken over."

I stood slowly. The numbness in my leg had subsided to the area clawed by the bear—still no blood, but a green phosphorescence glowed in the scratches. While I watched, the claw marks and the gleaming radiance faded away. All that was left of my injury was the tear in my pants.

"What would have happened had they succeeded?" I asked.

"Shadow wraiths merge with your body and take over your mind. The essence of your mentality is still alive, but they shove it aside so that they control everything; you can't stop them. They would have been able to leave the Umbra and live in your body until it gave out. Then they would take over another one."

"Like demons."

She nodded.

"At least we have nothing to worry about from those two anymore."

I thought about this and an uneasiness gathered in my stomach.

I looked about me, expecting another attack. The woods surrounding the clearing were quiet. Even the ground fog had dissolved. Traces of yellow and pink lightened the sky in every direction.

"It's almost morning," I said, surprised. "Yet, we can't have slept for more than a couple of hours."

Morgan chuckled at my mystified tone.

"There's no pattern to night and day in the Umbra," she explained. "Either one might last an hour or a century."

The uneasiness began to take shape, and an urgent need to hurry made my muscles twitch. I knew I couldn't stay put.

"We might as well take advantage of the daylight and get moving," I said.

I saddled Phobos while she gathered the saddle bags together and retrieved her alarm device. We left the fire burning since I didn't want to take the time to ferry water from the stream to put it out. I led Phobos to the warding zone's entrance, where I helped Morgan mount. She reached for the reins and I stopped her.

"Hold on," I ordered and gathered the reins in my hand.

Morgan began to protest, but I beat her words aside.

"We need to move fast, to get to Enion as quickly as possible."

The color drained from her face.

"You can't move quickly in the Umbra; you'll kill us if you try."

My voice became tight.

"The wolfwraith mentioned a gathering in Enion."

"That could mean anything."

"I don't think so. A gathering of creatures from the Umbra smells of war to me."

She shook her head in disbelief. She opened her mouth to speak and I overrode her.

"I can't take the chance. It might be that Merlin is planning to attack Enion with the creatures of this place," I said.

"But no one controls the Umbra."

"What do we know of these shadowlands? It might contain realities with beings who exist to serve a master. Merlin could be using them to attack my realm . . . I'm going to Enion to stop him."

"But you can't force your way through the Umbra!"

"I'm not going to force a passage. I'm . . . going to do something different."

A questioning look flared in her eye, but I could not have explained to her what I intended even if I had the words. I believe the bear's attack released something in me. The run I planned had been done before by me, at least my body remembered doing it, and my skin shivered with anticipation on the task ahead.

I saw concentration in her face and knew she was preparing to stop me.

I glared at her.

"Don't get in my way; I know I can do this . . . have done this in the past." Then I added gently, trying to take some of the sting out of my words, "Some part of me remembers doing it."

Her eyes narrowed and she stared at me as though worried about my memory.

I said, reassuring her, "Trust me. I won't fail."

I mounted behind her and guided Phobos onto the trail. Almost instantly the forest faded and was replaced by a lunar landscape under a burning cinder of a sun. Gravity mimicked

another moon that floated in my subconscious, and when I spurred his flanks, Phobos bounded forward in giant leaps. The first couple of strides were jarring and he nearly lost his footing. Then, he caught the rhythm and we sailed along easily.

We passed from this reality into another—brass colored and humid; the air smelled like braized copper. Moments later a frigid blast wiped everything away. A blizzard battered us and drifts obscured the trail. Phobos dashed through it, swirls of snow marking his wake. Moments later a monsoon swept it aside.

Not even a hundred steps and four different realities. I grinned fiercely. The journey had just started.

We traveled for another 'day' and 'night,' perhaps six to eight hours. I lost all sense of time and concentrated on my destination. The Umbra threw its changes at me, and, like a prizefighter, I rolled with every punch, but always kept the image of Enion fixed firmly in my mind's eye.

As the infinite shapes and realities unfolded around me, the Umbra began to make sense. This understanding was not a piece of memory but unfolded as a pattern lodged in my being—perhaps a genetic awareness in all Shadow Weavers that allowed control of this mayhem. Maybe necessity borne of the desire to protect my beloved Enion brought it to full revelation. Whatever the reason, I sensed that I had done this many times before, and as we rode, a certainty filled me. I knew the way of traversing the Umbra that Morgan with her inexperience could not have hoped to fathom.

I have read that true chaos is the disordered state of unformed matter and infinite space, supposed by some philosophers and religionists to have existed prior to the ordered universe. But the Umbra does not lack order as much as it encompasses all patterns of existence without any structure to give it a systematic design. The Umbra is the primal source, the wellspring of all universes and worlds. From its infinities of existence all the Tapestry Worlds draw their realities; from its limitless cluster of forms come all beasts, plants and elements. It is the fount of all things material.

Chaos is man's attempt to define it through philosophy.

This is my explanation of its timeless existence.

We passed under countless skies and through numberless landscapes, riding through fog and storm mostly, such was the frenzy of our passage. We skirted the edge of disaster a dozen times. We hung on cliff edges, raced ahead of tumbling avalanches, avoided tornadoes tearing up the ground beside us, and outdistanced the slashing wind and rain of typhoons. Always the trail bent and twisted through every obstacle according to my desire.

At last we eased onto a bleak landscape the color of burnished leather. Mist draped the edges. I brought Phobos from his mad gallop to a walk. Sweat gleamed on his withers and foam covered the bit in his mouth. His breath came in gasps that sounded like metal tearing.

We approached a dense area of mist similar to the gate we had passed through a *day* earlier.

"The boundary of the Umbra," Morgan whispered.

"Enion lies just beyond," I said, sure of my words. "When we pass through it, we will emerge some place, any place in the realm."

A rumble of thunder. I glanced behind. Our whirlwind passage had gathered a storm that now bore down on us. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as the air crackled and surged. I urged Phobos into the slick grayness. As soon as we entered, all sight and sound vanished. Though we were as close as books on a library shelf, I could not see or touch Morgan nor hear her

breathing. Even the sound of my own heart, beating wildly in my ears, grew silent.

The mist tingled against my skin. Sound returned as the fog thinned. I heard the plangent crash of waves. I smelled salt brine and a heavy redolence of seaweed.

We emerged from the Umbra into night, the darkness cut by a brilliant, full moon lapping the crags of Tirach Mir in orange, silver and blue. Lavender and saffron aurora licked a sable sky, blurring stars in familiar constellations.

Angry shrieks and a frightened rustle of feathers on the wind. Our entrance disturbed a pair of hunting sea kestrels—their snow white plumage luminous under the moon—riding ridge lift above serrated cliffs beside us. Far below a jade green sea spun a web of dazzling jeweled waves toward the cliff base. Out on the water, a convoy of merchantmen, guarded by corsairs flying Enion's flag, sailed the avenue of moonlight to the horizon.

Tirach Mir rose stately and brooding, the father of all mountains. Mistelwood covered his flanks like robes of office. And several leagues distant sat Enion, her lofty spires and serpentine walls glimmering captivatingly under the moon.

A murmur behind us. My hand went to my sword as I craned my neck in time to see the remnants of our fog passageway disappear, replaced by forest, rock and cliff, nothing to mark our entrypoint into Enion.

"The fog is gone," I said, not bothering to conceal my surprise at the disappearance of the boundary between Enion and the Umbra.

"The boundary can only be seen from within the shadowlands," Morgan explained calmly.

My bewilderment and her casualness reminded me that while I instinctively knew how to move and act in certain situations, my surroundings assailed me like psychoses. I happily recognized all the landmarks of home. And yet, thoughts of home pained me, for I knew these places as images from a battered mind. They were references not associated with anything substantial, since no remembrances of past events linked them to me. Once again, the precision with which my memories had been excised stymied me, and I began to wonder if my mind would ever reach a point of balance, where I could accept what happened without a sense of awe and questioning.

Phobos whinnied. He took a step and nearly stumbled, too spent to go on this night. Though I wanted desperately to enter Enion, I wasn't going to kill Phobos to get there. Besides, my muscles ached and my bones were saddle weary; my mind was tired from the effort to keep Enion firmly in focus during our passage through the Umbra.

Morgan didn't look any better than I felt.

I dismounted and helped her down. I led Phobos off the trail to a clearing with a small stream running through it. Giant smokewood trees, scaled with thick bark, shielded us from the bright moon with a tangled canopy of branches and large violet-striped leaves.

"We'll camp here and clean up," I told Morgan. "Tomorrow we'll enter Enion and you'll be safe from Merlin."

Even in the dim light of the clearing, doubt weighed heavily on her face.

"I promised you my protection and you shall have it," I assured her.

"That will have to suffice," she answered.

"I am Enion's ruler. What I say here is law."

"I know," she said apologetically. "It's just that I'm tired and fearful after our journey. And after Thereon, it's hard for me to trust anyone."

I understood the latter.

"After a night's sleep, even on this hard ground, you will feel differently. And when you are

safe within Enion's walls, you will have no need to fear Macbeth or Merlin again."

She nodded agreeably but I saw no smile on her face.

I built a small fire for warmth and the feeling that all fires give to weary travelers. Then I rubbed down Phobos while Morgan washed in the stream. She returned, the dirt gone from her face but not the haunted look which shadowed her eyes. I let it pass. She rolled up in her cloak and very quickly her breathing told me she was asleep.

It was my turn to clean up. I walked along the stream until I found a place where boulders and trees hid me from the camp and anything else that might be abroad at this time of night. I took off my clothes and sat in the cold water. I washed my shirt and undergarments. I did not want to enter Enion dirty and grimy like a homeless beggar.

In spite of my own fatigue, I did not return to camp and the rest I desperately craved. I found a rock beside the water and sat down on it, filled my pipe and smoked a bowl. Watching spirals of smoke thread skyward in the gloom, I contemplated all that had happened.

I was home, but not necessarily safe. My memories had not returned and in all my speculation that Merlin was responsible for my situation, a mutter of a suspicion could not be dismissed. At some point in the past I had left Enion, but under what guise, I knew not. I could be a national hero. On the other hand, my subjects may have revolted and tossed me out or forced me to flee for my life. They may not be happy to see me again, and I very well could be leading Morgan and myself to our deaths.

Her reluctance at coming here certainly pointed to that chance. She may have known something about Enion, let on to her by Merlin, that she was unwilling to tell me because she needed to escape from Thereon. Now that she had arrived, she was obviously averse to continuing onward.

The possibility occurred to me that Lord Qweg, this man, who I was and yet somehow wasn't, had a life here radically different than I imagined for myself. Overbearing, cruel, heartless, even mad as a hatter were strong possibilities. Certainly, the self-conceited fury, which I held firmly bottled beneath the surface, demonstrated a propensity toward violence. But even as I recognized my own temper, I recoiled from the taint of dishonor associated with it. Perhaps my loss of memory had provided me with a conscience, but I didn't believe that I would be cruel or heartless in the welfare of others whom I ruled over.

Still, here I was about to enter Enion with no idea what kind of reception awaited me. I wrestled with the morality of my position versus Morgan's presence for the rest of the bowl and in the end only one choice remained. Dammit! Enion held such a strong dominion over me that even my amnesia could not erase its images completely from my brain. I had to take the risk in hopes its proximity could jog my memories along. If I were going to defeat my brother and protect Enion from him, I had to start here.

The pipe drew cold and so did my thinking. I returned to the clearing. Morgan still lay asleep by the fire, her adolescent face, which had known the pain of a bastard father and the suffering of slavery, carefree in sleep. Her fate lay in an unknown—me. So be it. She had cast the dice and I was the number. But at least she hadn't crapped out. She had saved my life twice—in Thereon and with the shadow wraiths—and I owed her.

I looked in the direction of Enion, which lay along the sea road beyond the forest giants ringing this clearing. The feeling of vague uneasiness that began after the attack by the shadow wraiths persisted and gave rise to a flurry of gloomy impressions connected with this world. They weren't, strictly speaking, memories, but they fed my apprehensions in a tail chasing sort of way.

Shaking myself from this miasma, I gave Enion a jaunty salute, mostly because I didn't

want to bed down feeling low and grim in her presence. And because I couldn't resist the gesture. She was mine and I cared deeply what happened to her, but I didn't want this magnificent realm to think that if upon my return she did not return the favor, I would be offended.

I then rolled up in my own cloak and fell asleep.

. . . to be continued next month

Mark Reeder currently works for Centre Communications as a writer researcher for educational videos. His short fiction has been published on the web at Deep Magic, Quantum Muse and Dark Planet. The science fiction fantasy novel, "A Dark Knight for the King," co-authored by Ron Meyer, is available from Publish America as a POD through Barnes and Noble and Amazon.com. He has a Master's degree in history from the University of Cincinnati and has studied the martial arts for thirty years. Mark lives in Boulder, Colorado.

Leave a note for the author on our Message Boards